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THE TRAGEDY OF
MACBETH
BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Edited by
GEORGE LYMAN KITTREDGE

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INTRODUCTION

For the text of **Macbeth** the only authority is the First Folio./1
This prints what is obviously an acting version of the play,
somewhat changed from its original form. Hecate is an in-
trusive character, quite foreign to Shakespeare's conception of
the powers and attributes of the Weird Sisters: the whole
of the fifth scene in Act iii is a manifest interpolation; and
the same is true of iv, 1, 39-43, 125-132, which must stand or
fall with that scene. Two stage directions in the Folio (iii, 5,
33; iv, 1, 43) call for songs that are preserved in Middleton's
tragicomedy *The Witch* (see pp. 237-239, below). This fact,
as well as the character of Hecate in Middleton, suggests that

he may have been the playwright employed to revise Shake-
speare's **Macbeth** in an operatic spirit, out of harmony with the original design. Two other bits of the Folio text seem to be spurious ('Whiles . . . gives,' ii, 1, 60, 61; and 'Before . . . shield,' v, 8, 32, 33), but they do not sound like Middleton./2

Several passages besides the Hecate material have been thought to be interpolated, but without good reason. Coleridge rejected the Porter's soliloquy (ii, 3), oblivious of its dramatic irony and of the need for something of the kind to separate the exit of Macbeth and his wife from their reëntrance. The speeches of the wounded Sergeant (i, 2) have been attacked on the ground that their bombastic phraseology is not like Shake-
speare's language; but their mixture of bombast and grotesque bluntness accords perfectly with what was expected of a stage soldier.

Probably the reviser made some cuts, for the play is very short; but nothing essential has been lost. The difficulties in this regard that some critics have found with reference to the Thane of Cawdor (i, 2, 52-53, 63-64; i, 3, 72-73, 108-116) and to Macbeth's 'breaking this enterprise' of murder to his

/1 For the late Quarto and Davenant's version see pp. 231 ff., below.

/2 With these may be rated iii, 2, 54, 55, and iv, 1, 153, 154 ('No . . . cool'). One would gladly cancel also v, 2, 29, 30 ('Or . . . weeds'), but see the note on the passage.

wife and swearing to accomplish it (i, 7, 47-59) are quite im-
aginary. Nor is there anything mysterious about the Third Murderer (iii, 3). He is merely the person sent by Macbeth to give final orders to the other two assassins, in accordance with his promise (iii, 1, 128-132).

There is no decisive evidence for date. Outside limits are 1603 (the accession of James I)/1 and 1610 or 1611, when Simon Forman attended a performance of **Macbeth** at the Globe (see p. 239 below). 1610 is manifestly several years too late for the composition of the play, as both style and metre show. To fix upon a year within the limits many sup-
posed criteria have been cited -- all of them interesting, but none of them decisive. When James I was approaching the North Gate of Oxford, on his visit to the city in 1605 (August 27), 'tres quasi Sibyllae' emerged from St. John's College, 'as if from a wood,' and saluted the King, the Queen, and the Princes Henry and Charles, with a few Latin verses composed by Dr. Matthew Gwinne. The First Sibyl mentioned the prophecy spoken by the Weird Sisters to Banquo and desig-
nated King James as Banquo's †decendant./2 He was greeted also as a ruler of Scotland, England, and Ireland -- and likewise as monarch of Britain (now united), Ireland, and France

(cf. iv, 1, 121). But Shakespeare needed no hint from Gwinne for the Weird Sisters. They are central figures of the Macbeth legend as told by Holinshed, with whose standard work he had been familiar for more than a dozen years. The farmer (or other speculator in wheat) 'that hang'd himself on th' ex-

/1 James I succeeded Elizabeth on March 24, 1603, and was crowned on July 25.

/2 Fatidicas olim fama est cecinisse Sorores
Imperium sine fine tuae, Rex Inclyte, stirpis.
Banquonem agnouit generosa *Loquabria Thanum*.
Nec tibi *Banquo*, tuis sed sceptra nepotibus illae
Immortalibus immortalia vaticinatae.

The verses were first printed, so far as we know, in 1607, at the end of the quarto of *Vertumnus*, the Latin play by Gwinne which was acted before the King at Christ Church on August 29, 1605.

pectation of plenty' was a stock figure as early as the thirteenth century/1 and is not to be connected especially with the price of wheat in 1606. The Porter's 'equivocator' need not involve an allusion to Garnet, who was tried on March 28, 1606. Possible echoes of **Macbeth** in almost contemporary plays are interesting but by no means conclusive. The most striking is in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (v, 1, 19-29) -- itself a play of uncertain date but probably assignable to 1607:

And never shalt thou sit or be alone
In any place, but I will visit thee
With ghastly looks and put into thy mind
The great offences which thou didst to me.
When thou art at thy table with thy friends,
Merry in heart and fill'd with swelling wine,
I'll come in midst of all thy pride and mirth,
Invisible to all men but thyself,
And whisper such a sad tale in thine ear
Shall make thee let the cup fall from thy hand
And stand as mute and pale as death itself./2

Everything considered, Malone's date for **Macbeth**, 1606, has stood all tests for more than a century. Style and metre fit this date, but 1605 is also possible; for we cannot be quite sure whether **Macbeth** came just before *King Lear* or just after it./3

/1 Manly has found him in the *Exempla* of Jacques de Vitry, No. 164 (ed. Crane, p. 71): 'Audivi de quodam qui multum de grano congregavit et per multos annos ut carius venderet expectavit. Deus autem semper bonum tempus dabat, unde miser ille, spe sua frustratus, tandem pre tristicia super granum suum se ipsum suspendit.'

/2 Much less likely to be an echo of Macbeth is a passage in *The Puritan*

or The Widow of Watling Street (registered and published in 1607; written probably in 1606), iv, 3, 89-91 (*Shakespeare Apocrypha*, ed. Tucker Brooke, p. 246): 'In stead of a Iester, weele ha the ghost ith white sheete sit at vpper end a' th' Table.'

/3 J. Q. Adams, emphasizing the fact that **Macbeth** deals with subjects of much interest to James I, conjectures that it was one of the three plays acted at court by Shakespeare's company in the late summer of 1606, while Christian IV of Denmark was the King's guest. He believes that it was written in haste for this court performance. Malone had suggested that 'perhaps **Macbeth** was first exhibited' during this visit.

No evidence exists for any drama on the subject of Macbeth before Shakespeare. Both the 'Tragedie of the Kinge of Scottes' (performed at court in 1567-8)/1 and 'Malcolm Kynge of Scottes' (mentioned by Henslowe as purchased of Charles Massey in 1602)/2 are lost, but nothing suggests that they dealt with Macbeth's career. As for the 'story of Macdoel, or Macdobeth, or Macsomewhat' mentioned by William Kemp in 1600, that was obviously a ballad (if anything) -- not a play./3

For the plot Shakespeare had recourse to the second edition of Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicle* (1587). Since he was writing a tragedy and not a 'history,' he did not hesitate to take liberties. The rebellion of Macdonwald and the invasion of 'Sweno the Norways' king' are brought together. Banquo, King James's fictitious ancestor, is represented as a loyal subject, whereas in Holinshed he is Macbeth's chief ally in the attack on Duncan. For the murder of Duncan, Shakespeare has used Holinshed's account of the murder of King Duff by Donwald, which includes the drugging of the chamberlains and the prodigies described in ii, 4. The voice that cried 'Sleep no more!' was apparently suggested by what Holinshed tells of the dream of King Kenneth III. The Weird Sisters disappear from Holinshed immediately after their meeting with

/1 *Revels Accounts*, ed. Feuillerat, p. 119.

/2 *Diary*, fol. 105 (ed. Greg, I, 165).

/3 In *Kemps humble request to the impudent generation of Ballad-makers* (appended to *Kemps nine daies wonder*, 1600), he writes: 'I haue made a priuie search, what priuate Iigmonger of your iolly number, hath been the Author of these abhominable ballets written of me.' 'The search continuing, I met a proper vpright youth, onely for a little stooping in the shoulders: all hart to the heele, a penny Poet whose first making was the miserable stolne story of Macdoel, or Macdobeth, or Macsomewhat: for I am sure a Mac it was, though I never had the maw to see it: & hee tolde me there was a fat filthy ballet-maker, that should haue once been his Iourneyman to the trade: who liu'd about the towne: and ten to one, but he had thus terribly abused me & my Taberer.' The mention of a 'Ballad of Macdobeth' (or 'Macedbeth') in the Stationers' Register (1596) seems to be a forgery. See Greg, *The Library*, 4th Series, VIII (1928), 418, and *Modern Language Notes*, XLV (1930), 141, 142.

Macbeth upon the blasted heath. The warning to 'beware Macduff' (iv, 1, 71) is given by 'certeine wizzards, in whose words [Macbeth] put great confidence'; the prophecies concerning 'none of woman born' and Birnam Wood (iv, 1, 80, 92-94) are made by 'a certeine witch, whome hee had in great trust.'/1

Holinshed's authority was the *Scotorum Historiae* of Hector Boece (born ca. 1465, died 1536), which goes back to John Fordun's *Scotichronicon* (written in the latter part of the fourteenth century) and to Andrew of Wyntown's *Cronykil* (finished ca. 1424). Holinshed used John Bellenden's Scottish translation of Boece (printed ca. 1536), but he compared it industriously with the Latin original. The material combines a modicum of sober history with much ancient legend and considerable out-and-out fiction. To sift the actual facts from this conglomerate is a fascinating problem for investigators, but does not much concern the Shakespearean student. One may note, however, that Duncan's reign was A.D. 1034-1040 and Macbeth's A.D. 1040-1057. Macbeth seems to have had some title to the crown, but just what it was cannot be determined. He was certainly not Duncan's cousin-german, as Holinshed (following Boece) and Shakespeare (following Holinshed) represent. He asserted his claim, after the fashion of those times, by attacking Duncan with an armed troop at a place near Elgin. Duncan was killed, but whether or not he fell by Macbeth's own hand is uncertain. In 1054 Macbeth was defeated, probably at Dunsinane, by Siward (not accompanied by Malcolm). He maintained himself in the north until August, 1057, when he fell at Lumphanan in a battle with Malcolm. Banquo and Fleance are unhistorical characters, who make their first appearances in Boece. Macduff is likewise

/1 The earliest writer to attach these two prophecies to Macbeth's history is Wyntown (*Cronykil*, ca. 1420; vi, 18, 1929-1930, 2207-2228, ed. Laing, II, 130, 138-139). According to him, the former was uttered by the devil, who was Macbeth's father. The source of the latter he does not specify, but it seems to have been the same demon. Both accord with widespread folktales. For a thorough treatment of the Macbeth legend see Ernst Kröger, *Die Sage von Macbeth bis zu Shakspere*, 1904.

fictitious -- at least in any such rôle as he plays in Holinshed and Shakespeare. Macdonwald and Cawdor were also brought into the story by Boece.

The historical Macbeth was a sane and beneficent ruler. Fordun, on the contrary, represents him as a savage tyrant. Boece combines these two characters, and Holinshed follows Boece. Macbeth, he tells us, was 'somewhat cruell of nature,'/1

yet for ten years he ruled wisely and well:

'He set his whole intention to mainteine iustice, and to punish all enormities and abuses, which had chanced through the feeble and slouthfull administration of Duncane. . . . But this was but a counterfet zeale of equitie shewed by him, partlie against his naturall inclination, to purchase thereby the fauour of the people. Shortlie after, he began to shew what he was, in stead of equitie practising crueltie. For the pricke of conscience . . .
caused him euer to feare, least he should be serued of the same cup, as he had ministred to his predecessor. The woords also of the three weird sisters would not out of his mind, which as they promised him the kingdome, so likewise did they promise it at the same time vnto the posteritie of Banquho. . . . After the contriued slaughter of Banquho, nothing prospered with the foresaid Makbeth; for in maner euerie man began to doubt his owne life, and durst vnneth [i.e., hardly] appeare in the kings presence; and euen as there were manie that stood in feare of him, so likewise stood he in feare of manie, in such sort that he began to make those awaie by one surmized cauillation or other, whome he thought most able to worke him anie displeasure. At length he found such sweetnesse by putting his nobles thus to death, that his earnest thirst after bloud in this behalfe might in no wise be satisfied.'

Shakespeare could not fail to perceive the absurdity of his source in this description of Macbeth's character. How could the King hide his true nature for a decade and then break forth on a sudden in the full strength of inborn savagery? In delineating Macbeth's character, therefore, Shakespeare departed widely from Holinshed. In the first scene of the play we learn nothing about him but his name. The next scene is definitely expository. From beginning to end it is a laudation of Macbeth -- 'brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name)'; 'valour's minion' (or darling); 'Bellona's bridegroom.' The

/1 Cf. Boece: 'nisi ingentem fortitudini crudelitatem natura immiscuisset.'

Sergeant praises him, expressing the sentiments of the army and the common people; then Ross enters and voices the admiration of the peers; and finally King Duncan closes the scene with a kind of suspiration -- 'noble Macbeth.' The words of Macbeth to his wife, soon after, fitly describe the tenour of the whole -- 'golden opinions from all sorts of people.'/1 The impression that the expository scene makes upon us is decisive: Macbeth is the first of the Scottish nobles, beloved and admired by everybody, from the rank and file of the army to the King himself -- a great soldier, a true patriot, a loyal subject. He is contrasted with 'the merciless Macdonwald' and with 'that most disloyal traitor, the Thane of Cawdor.' Such was Macbeth before the 'supernatural soliciting' that determined his later career.

A second piece of evidence is highly significant, for it concerns two qualities not touched upon in the expository scene. It is Lady Macbeth's soliloquy after she reads her husband's letter. She knows him well. He is 'not without ambition,' but his ambition is of the honourable kind. The thought of kingship attracts him, but he will shrink from achieving the crown by any deed that will stain his conscience: 'What thou wouldst highly, that wouldst thou holily.' And besides, he is gentle and kindly by temperament, and 'the nearest way' -- which to her straightforward feminine logic is the only way -- will horrify him. Lady Macbeth, then, adds to what we have learned in the expository scene -- to valour and loyalty and patriotism -- the qualities of a scrupulous conscience and a humane and kindly temper. This last trait, one remembers, has often been noted -- to the amazement of superficial observers of human nature -- in great military heroes, veritable thunderbolts of war. That the Lady is right in her analysis is confirmed by much circumstantial evidence: by Macbeth's horror when the thought of murder first darts

/1 i, 7, 33. This phrase would be almost enough to prove the genuineness of the second scene, even if that scene were not, as it is, vitally necessary to the understanding of the drama.

into his mind; by his vacillation before the deed/1; by the hallucinations that precede and follow it; by his naïve wonder that he 'could not say "Amen!" when they did say "God bless us!"'; by his remorse. Even the savagery of his later career, which has deterred some critics from accepting the unimpeachable evidence of his wife, is in fact a confirmation. A savage may be little the worse for a murder or two, but Macbeth has subverted the very foundations of his being. He has 'cursed his better angel from his side and fallen to reprobance.'

Macbeth is blessed -- and cursed -- with an imagination of extraordinary power, which visualizes to the verge of delirium. Every idea that enters his mind takes instant visible shape: he *sees* what another would merely *think*. And this poetic vision (which at the outset so presented the hideousness of murder as almost to thwart his purpose) comes later to his aid. It enables him to think and speak about himself as if he were a spectator at his own tragedy, and so he finds a refuge from the direct contemplation of fact. Thus he grows stronger and more resolute as fate closes in upon him, and is never greater than in the desperate valour that marks his end.

The rôle and character of Lady Macbeth are barely suggested by Holinshed. He tells us that Macbeth was 'greatlie

incouraged' by 'the woords of the thre weird sisters' to 'vsurpe the kingdome by force.' 'But,' he adds, 'speciallie his wife lay sore vpon him to attempt the thing, as she that was verie ambitious, burning in vnquenchable desire to beare the name of a queene.' That is all: Holinshed never mentions her again. Donwald's wife, however, plays a larger part in the murder of King Duff. 'She counselled [Donwald] (sith the king oftentimes vsed to lodge in his house without anie gard about him, other than the garrison of the castell, which was wholie at his commandement) to make him awaie, and shewed him the meanes wherby he might soonest accomplish it'; and

/1 Note especially the antithesis of ambition and pity in Macbeth's soliloquy in i, 7, 1-28. Cf. the use of 'unfortunate' in iv, 1, 152.

Donwald, 'though he abhorred the act greatlie in heart, yet through instigation of his wife' gave instructions to 'foure of his seruants' to kill the king. The motive in this case was not ambition but revenge.

Lady Macbeth, then, is Shakespeare's own creation. Like all normal women, she is ambitious, but her ambition is rather for her husband than herself. It is for his head that 'fate and metaphysical aid' have destined 'the golden round' (i, 5, 26-31); her task is to remove the obstacles inherent in his nature. With her, to see is to purpose and to purpose is to proceed right onward with an eye single to the end in view: 'the nearest way' is the only way. She sways Macbeth by her strength of will and her feminine charm. She coaxes him and soothes him and taunts him, as the occasion may require; but she does not bully him as Goneril bullies Albany. Their devotion to each other is manifest in every word they speak. Their marriage is the perfect union of complementary natures, each supplying those qualities that the other lacks. Thus the climax of their tragic history is Macbeth's apathy when he hears that his wife is dead: she must have died sometime -- and what does it matter when? Life's but a walking shadow.

Lady Macbeth's strength resides in her nervous force and the terrible simplicity of her point of view. She is no creature of heroic frame./1 She is not a Goneril or a Brynhild or a Clytemnestra. And she has overestimated her nervous energy. It might have sufficed to carry her, unshaken, through the consequences of any act that she could have executed alone. It could not suffice when constantly drawn upon to support and animate her husband, who seems to her to be going mad. Hence the infinite pathos of her final breakdown when the bloody instructions have returned to plague the inventors.

No satisfactory time-scheme for Shakespeare's tragedy can

/1 See iii, 2, 45 ('dearest chuck'); v, 1, 57 ('this little hand'); and note her swoon in ii, 3, 124-131.

be constructed. Somehow, between the accession of Macbeth in Act ii and his death in Act v, his long reign of seventeen years (1040-1057) must be accounted for. Much time has certainly elapsed. Otherwise Malcolm could not have operated his test of Macduff (iv, 3), for Macduff would have known his true character; and Malcolm's failure to recognize Ross (iv, 3, 160-153) would be meaningless; and Macduff's and Ross's descriptions of Macbeth's tyrannical savagery (iv, 3, 4-8, 164-176) would lose all their force. No computation satisfies the requirements. There is, to be sure, an interval between Act ii and Act iii, and another between Scenes ii and iii of Act iv; but their sum is inadequate. Yet this is a difficulty that confronts the mathematician alone: it never troubles the man in the theatre. Indeed, it does not even occur to him. When Macbeth falls, we feel that it was long ago that he met the Weird Sisters on the blasted heath. He has reached the autumn of life and is looking forward to a friendless and desolate old age. We reckon the interval, not by clock and calendar, but in terms of our emotional exhaustion. The lull in the action during the long dialogue between Macduff and Malcolm (iv, 3) -- with its leisurely movement, so different from the tragic sweep and stress of what comes before -- fills up the requisite interval for us. In short, Shakespeare has followed his usual method: he has measured time imaginatively, not by months and years.

For the Weird Sisters in their relation to Macbeth the earliest authority is Wyntown, who makes them appear to him in a dream. Their name comes from the Anglo-Saxon *wyrd*, 'fate.' One night, Wyntown tells us, Macbeth 'thought in his dreaming' that, as he sat beside King Duncan 'at a seat in hunting,' he saw three women go by:

> He thowcht quhile he was swa syttand,
> He sawe thre wemen by gangand,
> And thai wemen than thowcht he
> Thre werd Systrys mast lyk to be.

The first said, 'Lo, yonder the Thane of Cromarty'; the second, 'Yonder I see the Thane of Moray'; the third, 'I see the King.'/1 Banquo is nowhere mentioned in Wyntown's chronicle. Boece took the incident from Wyntown, working it up

into the shape in which Shakespeare found it in Holinshed, who uses both Boece's Latin and Bellenden's Scottish translation. The term 'Weird Sisters' Holinshed adopted from Bellenden. Holinshed's account, which is of prime importance for the understanding of Shakespeare's Weird Sisters, is as follows:

Shortlie after happened a strange and vncouth woonder, which afterward was the cause of much trouble in the realme of Scodand, as ye shall after heare. It fortuned as Makbeth and Banquho iournied towards Fores, where the king then laie, they went sporting by the waie togither without other companie, saue onelie themselues, passing thorough the woods and fields, when suddenlie in the middest of a laund, there met them three women in strange and wild apparell, resembling creatures of elder world, whome when they attentiuelie beheld, wondering much at the sight, the first of them spake and said; All haile Makbeth, thane of Glammis (for he had latelie entered into that dignitie and office by the death of his father Sinell).
The second of them said; Haile Makbeth thane of Cawder. But the third said; All haile Makbeth that heereafter shalt be king of Scotland.

Then Banquho; What manner of women (saith he) are you, that seeme so little fauourable vnto me, whereas to my fellow heere, besides high offices, ye assigne also the kingdome, appointing foorth nothing for me at all? Yes (saith the first of them) we promise greater benefits vnto thee, than vnto him, for he shall reigne in deed, but with an vnluckie end: neither shall he leaue anie issue behind him to succeed in his place, where contrarilie thou in deed shalt not reigne at all, but of thee those shall be borne which shall gouerne the Scotish kingdome by long order of continuall descent. Herewith the foresaid women vanished immediatlie out of their sight. This was reputed at the first but some vaine fantasticall illusion by Mackbeth and Banquho, insomuch that Banquho would call Mackbeth in iest, king of Scotland; and Mackbeth againe would call him in sport likewise, the father of manie kings. But afterwards the common opinion was, that these women were either the weird sisters, that is (as ye would say) the goddesses of destinie, or else some nymphs or feiries, indued with knowledge of prophesie by their necromanticall science, bicause euerie

/1 *Orygynale Cronykil*, vi, 18, 1857-1869 (ed. Laing, II, 127, 128).

thing came to passe as they had spoken./1 For shortlie after, the thane of Cawder being condemned at Fores of treason against the king committed; his lands, liuings, and offices were giuen of the kings liberalitie to Mackbeth.

In adopting the term 'Weird Sisters' from Holinshed Shakespeare was obviously adopting also Holinshed's definition -- 'the goddesses of destiny.'/2 The Weird Sisters, then, are the Norns of Scandinavian mythology./3 The Norns were goddesses who shaped beforehand the life of every man. Sometimes they came in the night and stood by the cradle of the new-born child, uttering their decrees; for their office was not to prophesy only, but to determine. Sometimes they were met

/1 'Vana ea Maccabaeo Banquhonique visa, atque per ludum Banquho Maccabaeum regem salutabat: Banquhonemque Maccabaeus vicissim multorum regum parentem. Verum ex euentu postea parcas aut nymphas aliquas fatidicas diabolico astu praeditas fuisse interpretatum est vulgo, quum vera ea quae dixerant euenisse cernerent' (Boece, xii, ed. 1526, fol. 258 rº). 'This prophecy and divinatioun wes haldin mony dayis in derision to Banquho and Makbeth. For sum time, Banquho wald call Makbeth, King of Scottis, for derisioun; and he, on the samin maner, wald call Banquho, the fader of mony kingis. Yit, becaus al thingis succedit as thir wemen devinit, the pepill traistit and jugit thame to be weird sisteris' (Bellenden, xii, 3, ed. 1821, II, 259).

/2 The Weird Sisters are styled witches in the stage directions. In the text, however, they are never so called (except for the insulting 'Aroint thee, witch!' of the sailor's wife in i, 3,6), but always 'the Weird Sisters' or 'the Sisters' or 'the Weird Women.' The Folio spells the word *weyard* (iii, 1, 2; iii, 4, 133; iv, 1, 136) or *weyward* (i, 3, 32; i, 5, 6; ii, 1, 20).

/3 On the Norns see J. A. MacCulloch, *The Mythology of All Races*, II, *Eddic* (1930), pp. 238-247, 254, 255. In Scandinavian tradition they are often conceived as powers of evil. Cf. Curry, 'The Demonic Metaphysics of *Macbeth*,' *Studies in Philology* (Chapel Hill), XXX (1933), 395 ff. In the Scottish rhymed *Trojan War* of ca. 1400 (l. 2818, ed. Horstmann, *Barbour's Legendensammlung*), 'a werde sistere' translates 'vnam ex illis quam gentes fatam [i.e., fée] appellant' in the *Historia Destructionis Troiae* of Guido delle Colonne (ed. Griffin, p. 269). About the middle of the fifteenth century, Reginald Pecock speaks of the current 'opinioun that .iij. sistris (whiche ben spiritis) comen to the cradilis of infantis, forto sette to the babe what schal bifalle to him' (*Repressor*, ii, 4, ed. Babington, I, 155). These two passages suffice to prove that the term 'Weird Sisters' was not restricted to the classical Parcae, although we know that it was also applied to them.

in wild places and at unexpected moments. Once they were seen in a remote den in the woods, weaving the visible web of doom on the day of a great battle in which many perished./1 Now they appear as the guardians of a favourite hero; again, they are hostile, and bent only on a man's destruction: but always and everywhere they are great and terrible powers, from whose mandate there is no appeal. In all probability, their attachment to the story goes back to the time of Macbeth himself. Their presence is due to the large infusion of Norse blood in the Scottish race, and their function is in full accord with the doctrines of Norse heathendom. That function, then, was an essential element in the history of Macbeth as it came into Shakespeare's hands. These were not ordinary witches or seeresses. They were great powers of destiny, great ministers of fate. They had determined the past; they governed the present; they not only foresaw the future, but decreed it. All this was manifest to Shakespeare as he read the chronicle. He assimilated the conception in its entirety by a single act of sympathetic imagination; and he reproduced it in his tragedy, not in any literal or dogmatic shape, but coloured and intensified

by his creative genius, and modified by his trained sense of what it is possible to represent upon the actual stage. The Weird Sisters, then, are not hags in the service of the devil; they are not mere personifications of a man's evil desires or his ruthless craving for power. They are as actual and objective as the Furies that lie snoring in bloodthirsty dreams round about the fugitive Orestes as he clings affrighted to the altar of Apollo.

Thus the tragedy of **Macbeth** is inevitably fatalistic, but Shakespeare attempts no solution of the problem of free will and predestination. It is not his office to make a contribution to philosophy or theology. He never gives us the impression that a man is not responsible for his own acts. 'It will have blood, they say; blood will have blood.'

/1 *Njálssaga*, cap. 157 (*Íslendinga Sögur*, III [1875], 898-902. Here they are identified with the Valkyries. Their weaving song is translated in Gray's *Fatal Sisters*.

Obviously, however, Shakespeare could not produce the goddesses of fate *in propriis personis* upon the stage in a Scottish tragedy. He had to bring them within the range of the spectators' beliefs and experiences. And this he accomplished by giving them several attributes of a class of women with whom the audience had perfect familiarity -- the witch. They kill swine, they brew hell-broth, they have familiar spirits, they dig up the dead to use fragments of mortality in their charms. Yet they remain indisputably supernatural. They are not amenable to the halter or the stake. If they choose to wear the garb of witches for a time, that is their own affair. Their empire is as wide as the world, and their power extends to the last syllable of recorded time.