



REWRITING FATE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF WITCHES, POWER AND NARRATIVE IN *MACBETH* AND *WYRD SISTERS*

Dr.L.M.Swarnalatha

Associate Professor,

PG & Research Department of English,
Vellalar College for women, Erode, Tamilnadu, India.

Abstract

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Terry Pratchett's *Wyrd Sisters* belong to different literary traditions-one a classic tragedy and the other a satirical fantasy novel-but they share a deep thematic and structural connections. *Wyrd Sisters* is a direct parody of *Macbeth*, reinterpreting its key elements-such as the role of the witches, the nature of fate, and the corruption-through humour, irony and subversion. This paper is a comparative study which analyse the major parallels and divergences between the two texts, focusing on the representation of the witches, the themes of fate and freewill, the depiction of setting and the role of theatre and story telling in shaping reality.

Keywords: Witches, Fate vs Free will, Power, Magic, Metafiction, Prophecy, Satire.

William Shakespeare's Scottish play *Macbeth* and Terry Pratchett's Discworld series novel, *Wyrd Sisters* share thematic connections that span centuries, genre and tone. While the former is a dark tragedy that explores the corrupting influence of power and the consequence of ambition, the latter is a comedic, satirical novel that parodies these same themes within the fantastical world of Discworld. Both of these works has supernatural influences, particularly the witches, whose prophecies and actions drive the plot forward.

The weird sisters in *Macbeth* are central to the play's engagement with the supernatural and predestination. Their prophecies suggest an inevitability to Macbeth's rise and fall, but the extent to which they control his fate remains ambiguous. Structuralist theory, particularly Claude Levi-Strauss's archetypal figures sheds light on this, as witches function as archetypal figures resembling the Moirai(Fates) of Greek Mythology. Like the Morai, they predict the course of events, but they do not explicitly dictate Macbeth's actions. Freud's concept of the unconscious suggest that the witches externalize Macbeth's repressed desires. They do not implant ambition in him, rather, they give voice to what already exists within this psyche. From a Lacanian perspective, the witches embody the symbolic order, presenting cryptic language that Macbeth misinterprets. Their famous utterings- "Fair is foul, and Foul is fair", highlights the instability of meaning, a key tenet of deconstruction. Macbeth's downfall results from a fixed fate but from his misreading of their prophecies. His belief in an absolute, predetermined destiny blinds him to the nuances of their words, leading to tragic consequences. A New Historicist analysis places the witches within the cultural anxieties of early modern England. During Shakespeare's time, King James I's treatise *Daemonologie* (1597) reinforced fears of witchcraft as a real, disruptive force against divine authority. The Weird sisters, therefore, reflect contemporary concerns about political instability and divine legitimacy. Macbeth's ascension, facilitated by their prophecies, represents a challenge to the natural order, making the supernatural an extension of broader socio-political fears rather than a purely magical element.

In contrast, Pratchett's *Wyrd Sisters* deconstructs the notion of fate as an inescapable force. As a postmodern parody of Shakespeare's tragedy, the novel challenges the assumption that supernatural figures dictate destiny. Instead of being passive manipulators of fate, Granny Weatherwax, Nanny Ogg and Magrat

Garlick actively intervene in the course of history. Structuralist Intertextuality, as discussed by Roland Barthes, positions *Wyrd Sisters* as a text that gains meaning through its relationship with *Macbeth*. However, Shakespeare's witches are enigmatic, Pratchett's witches are pragmatic and self-aware, consciously rejecting the idea of preordained fate. From a feminist perspective, Pratchett's witches reclaim female agency in ways that Shakespeare's do not. In *Macbeth*, the witches exist on the margins of gender norms- they are described as having beards and are excluded from traditional maternal or domestic roles. Their power is feared rather than respected. In contrast, Granny Weatherwax and her companions operate within a world where female power is not inherently evil but rather an alternative form of wisdom. Their manipulation of fate challenges the patriarchal structures that govern traditional fantasy narratives. A key scene in *Wyrd Sisters* highlights this subversion: the witches alter the past by ensuring the rightful heir to the throne survives. This act contradicts Shakespeare's fatalism, reinforcing the idea that fate is a narrative construct that can be rewritten. From a structuralist perspective, the witches in both texts serve as agents of transformation, but while Shakespeare's witches represent a passive force of fate, Pratchett's witches actively challenge and rewrite history.

From a Freudian perspective, the human psyche consists of three main components- Id (Instinctual Desires), Ego (rational Mediator) and Superego (moral conscience). The weird Sister's prophecy- "All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!// Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!// Hail to thee, that shalt be king hereafter!" (1.3.48-50)- awakens Macbeth's id-driven ambition, which had previously been restrained by his ego and superego. Freud's theory of repression suggests that humans suppress forbidden desires, which then resurface in indirect or distorted ways. Macbeth's immediate response- "Stay, You imperfect speakers, tell me more" (1.3.70)-that reveals his unconscious recognition of a latent aspiration of power, even before any external confirmation arrives. The prophecy does not implant ambition within him; instead, it verbalizes an unconscious drive he has long suppressed. His startled reaction and subsequent fixation on the prophecy demonstrate a classic Freudian return of the repressed, where forbidden desires emerge into consciousness under the guise of fate. The second set of prophecies-the warnings of bloody child (Macduff), the crowned child with a tree (Birnam wood), and the armed head (beware Macduff)-further drive Macbeth toward self destruction. In Freudian terms, his belief in his invincibility that none of woman born shall harm Macbeth aligns with the death drive (Thanatos), where an individual, in trying to master fate, inadvertently hastens their own annihilation. Macbeth's complete disillusionment I Act 5- "Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player/ That struts and frets his hour upon the stage" (5.5.24-25)- illustrates his psychological collapse. By following his unconscious desires instead of confronting them rationally, he becomes a victim of his own projections, rather than supernatural destiny.

Freud's structural model offers a lens through which Nanny Ogg as the Id, Granny Weatherwax as the superego, Margaret Garlick as the Ego. Nanny represents instinct, pleasure and desire. She drinks, sings bawdy songs and embraces the physical world without guilt. Like the Freudian Id, she is driven by basic urges but is not malicious- she simply follows her impulses. Granny represents order, discipline and moral authority. She is the voice of strict control, constantly restraining both Nanny and Margaret, much like the superego represses the Id's desires. She enforces social and magical laws, embodying the moral conscience. Margaret balances the extremes of the other two witches. She is the rational mediator, torn between the Id and Superego. Her personal journey is one of self-discovery, where she struggles to assert her own identity. Freud's concept of the Uncanny (Das Unheimliche) – the eerie sense of familiarity that arises when repressed fears resurface- is embodied in the Duke, a Macbeth-like character who has rewritten history to suppress his own guilt. The Duke kills the king and seizes power, much like Macbeth. However, his repression of guilt leads to paranoia and hallucinations, mirroring Macbeth's descent into madness. His inability to distinguish reality from fiction aligns with Freud's idea that repressed material always returns in distorted ways- his fear manifests as delusions, just as Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost. The witches actively confront and manipulate history, forcing the Duke to face his repressed guilt. His madness is a direct result of his refusal to accept his past, illustrating the classic Freudian idea that repressed trauma will always find a way back into consciousness. Jacques Lacan's theory of the symbolic order-the realm of language, law and social structures-applies directly to *Wyrd Sister*. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, identity is shaped by language and narratives, meaning that whoever controls the story controls reality. The Duke's attempt to rewrite history through a play that distorts reality is an effort to assert dominance over the symbolic order. However, Granny Weatherwax and the witches resist this manipulation, understanding that reality is shaped by collective belief. By exposing the truth, they disrupt the Duke's control over the symbolic, forcing the kingdom to recognize the true heir. This aligns with Lacan's concept of *meconnaissance* (misrecognition)- the idea that people construct false identities based on external narratives. The Duke misrecognizes himself as a rightful king, while Granny forces society to confront the real history.

Both *Macbeth* and *Wyrd sisters* present powerful female figures-witches, queens, and usurpers-yet they differ drastically in how they portray female agency, power and the subversion of patriarchal structures. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* largely reflects the misogynistic anxieties of its time, portraying women's influence as

dangerous and unnatural. In contrast, Pratchett's *Wyrd Sisters* reclaims female power, offering a feminist revision of Shakespeare's themes where women control their own destinies rather than being vilified for their influence. The witches in *Macbeth* are mysterious, cryptic and linked to dark supernatural forces. They manipulate language in ways that confuse and unsettle: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair". Their presence reflects patriarchal fears about female autonomy and knowledge-they exist outside traditional social roles, and their power disrupts male authority. The weird sisters do not act directly, they do not force Macbeth's hand but rather plant the seed of ambition, leaving men to destroy themselves. This aligns with the patriarchal trope of women as dangerous temptresses whose knowledge leads to male downfall. Pratchett's witches are not malevolent or cryptic; they use their knowledge to protect the kingdom. Rather than manipulating others toward destruction, they intervene directly to restore order, showing that women's power can be constructive rather than threatening. The novel reclaims the stereotype of the witch as a powerful, wise woman rather than a figure of fear.

Another key comparison is between Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* and the Duchess in *Wyrd Sisters*, both of whom are ambitious women who seek power through their husbands. Lady Macbeth famously rejects traditional femininity in her pursuit of power. She manipulates Macbeth, shaming him into committing murder, reinforcing the stereotype of women as corrupting influences of men. However, her power is ultimately unsustainable- she descends into madness, haunted by guilt, reinforcing the idea that women who step beyond their traditional roles are destined for destruction. Lady Macbeth embodies patriarchal fears about women who reject domestic roles, showing that in Shakespeare's world, female ambition must be punished rather than rewarded. Pratchett's Duchess is a satirical take on Lady Macbeth. Like Lady Macbeth, she is power hungry and manipulative, pushing her husband to commit murder. However, Pratchett exaggerates her cruelty, making her a darkly comic figure rather than a tragic one. Unlike Lady Macbeth, whose ambition leads to her own downfall, the Duchess's evil is deliberately punished by external forces, reinforcing the idea that abuse of power-rather than female ambition itself-is the real problem. By making the Duchess a parody, Pratchett exposes how historical portrayals of ambitious women often rely on misogynistic stereotypes, showing that female power is not inherently destructive, but its portrayal in male dominated narratives often is. Women in *Macbeth* like Lady Macbeth, the witches and even Lady Macduff are voiceless figures and do not control the story. Lady Macbeth is ultimately silenced by madness. The witches speak in riddles, but their true motives remain hidden. Through the subversion of witch stereotypes, the critique of patriarchal narratives, and the emphasis on women controlling their own stories, Pratchett transforms Shakespeare's tragedy into a feminist triumph, proving that history and fate belong to those who have the power to rewrite them.

In Terry Pratchett's *Wyrd Sisters*, the setting plays a critical role in shaping the narrative, tone and themes of the novel. Pratchett's fictional world of Discworld and particularly the kingdom of Lancre, provides not only the backdrop for the events but also serves as a commentary on the nature of power, magic and the fluidity of storytelling. The kingdom of Lancre is not a vast empire or a mythical kingdom; it is a small, rural realm that becomes the site of political intrigue and fantastical events. Lancre represents the absurdity of monarchy and hierarchal rule. The kingdom becomes embroiled in a battle for the throne, where the rightful heir is nearly erased, and a usurper, Duke Felmet, steals the crown. The setting reflects how even small, seemingly insignificant places are not immune to power struggles and corruption. Lancre castle, like its counterpart in *Macbeth*, serves as a symbol of authority and power. It is here that the Duke's plot to usurp the throne unfolds, much like Macbeth's eventual takeover of Scotland. However, unlike in *Macbeth*, where the castle represents a space of regicide and treachery, the Lancre castle is depicted with a sense of absurdity. In *Wyrd sisters*, the theatre troupe plays a central role in rewriting history, making the castle not only a place of physical power but also a metaphor for contractedness of history and reality. The theatre troupe is tasked with creating a dramatic performance that would reinforce the Duke's illegitimate rule. However, in a twist of metafictional brilliance, the witches use this opportunity to subvert the narrative and reveal the truth, showing that stories can shape reality and the power is not simply held through force, but through control of narrative. The witches in *Wyrd Sisters* are powerful figures, but they do not use magic in the showy, destructive manner instead they use their magic as a tool for practical problem-solving and shaping the future. Granny Weatherwax, for instance, practices headology, a form of psychological manipulation that relies on understanding people's perceptions and actions. This is a far cry from the fear-based magic of traditional witches, where power comes from making people afraid. Granny's power is rooted in understanding the human mind, showing that wisdom and empathy can be just as potent as spells or curses.

In *Macbeth*, the witches are often accompanied by storms, thunder and unnatural darkness, reinforcing their connection to fate and destruction. In a fantasy setting, their presence could warp reality-time slows, the air thickens, the land rots where they stand. The world around them shift between realms, with flickers of alternate futures visible in the mist. Their potion ingredients for instance eye of newt and toe of frog invoke a grotesque, almost primal magic-this could be expanded into necromantic rites or forbidden blood magic.

Macbeth and *Wyrd Sisters* share a foundation in Shakespearean tragedy, they diverge in their treatment of fate, power and the role of witches. Pratchett's novel serves as both a loving homage and a pointed critique of *Macbeth*, questioning the deterministic view of fate and reclaiming witches as complex, capable figures rather than harbingers of doom. Ultimately, the two works exist in dialogue with each other, one exploring the consequences of ambition unchecked by morality and the other celebrating the ability to rewrite destiny with wit, intelligence and magic.

References

- [1] Bek-Pedersen, K. (2022). *Macbeth* and 'The Weird Sisters' – on Fates and Witches. *Scottish Studies*, 39, 58. <https://doi.org/10.2218/ss.v39.7159>
- [2] Pratchett, Terry. *Wyrd Sisters*. HarperCollins, 1988.
- [3] Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Wordsworth Editions, 1992.

