

Cinematic Interpretations of the Three Witches in Macbeth Adaptations: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract:

This research paper explores the diverse portrayals of the three witches, known as the "weird sisters," in various film adaptations of William Shakespeare's acclaimed Tragedy, *Macbeth*. Drawing upon four seminal adaptations spanning different eras and cultural contexts – Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1958), Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971), Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* (2004), and Joel Coen's *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (2021) – this study examines how these enigmatic characters have been interpreted and reimagined across different cinematic representations.

The analysis delves into the varying depictions of the witches, ranging from traditional, ominous figures associated with evil and supernatural forces to more nuanced and ambiguous embodiments of fate and destiny. It investigates how these interpretations reflect the artistic visions of the directors and the evolving cultural and socio-political contexts in which the films were produced.

By scrutinizing the diverse characterizations of the witches, this research aims to shed light on Shakespeare's adaptability and the creative opportunities it presents filmmakers to explore timeless themes and characters through the lens of their unique perspectives. The comparative approach employed in this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the enduring relevance and interpretative possibilities of *Macbeth* across different mediums and cultural landscapes.

Keywords: *Macbeth*, Film Adaptations, Three Witches, Shakespeare, Comparative Analysis

Introduction

Although written between 1603 and 1607, *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare was first published in 1623 in the First Folio. It is believed that Shakespeare wrote the play to impress King James I. The character of Banquo was created. Shakespeare also used the three witches to appeal to King James, who was interested in the supernatural. The play is said to have been set in 11th-century Scotland, even though it was written and published in the 17th century. The paper takes the following movies

from different countries and directors to analyze the characters of the witches, where each movie is set in different times. The movies and television adaptations considered are:

1. Throne of Blood (1958), directed by Akira Kurosawa.
2. Macbeth (1971), directed by Roman Polanski.
3. Maqbool (2004), directed by Vishal Bhardwaj.
4. The Tragedy of Macbeth (2021), directed by Joel Coen.

How the three witches from William Shakespeare's Macbeth are portrayed in the classic play's motion picture adaptations has fascinated and intrigued many. Known by many as the 'weird sisters,' these mysterious and otherworldly figures have been interpreted in various ways, reflecting the changing environment of film and the imaginative choices made by filmmakers and performers.

Specific versions present the witches as gloomy, menacing older women, emulating the stereotypically evil image of witches in popular culture. These depictions highlight their function as agents of evil, hinting at Macbeth's eventual decline into despotism and insanity.

In contrast, the witches have been portrayed in other interpretations as more magical, ethereal characters cloaked in ambiguity and mystery. According to these readings, Macbeth is driven towards his terrible fate by the witches, who serve as metaphorical agents of fate and destiny.

Furthermore, modern versions frequently go further into the witches' personalities, giving them nuanced motives and histories. These revised depictions provide a new angle on their power over the story's developments.

All things considered, the way the three witches are portrayed in Macbeth film adaptations is an engrossing examination of the development of cinematic storytelling. It demonstrates the adaptability of Shakespeare's timeless characters and the artistic opportunities they present to directors.

Witchcraft in Early and Medieval Europe

Shakespeare's play, Macbeth, is set in 11th-century Scotland. In Scotland, witch-hunt was more severe than in Protestant Europe. Over 40,000 so-called witches were accused, and over 2500 were executed. There were over two executions per one thousand population of Scotland, which is four times 0.5 executions per thousand, i.e., the European average. In Scotland, it was a secular crime to practice witchcraft between 1536 and 1736. Most of the accusations and executions in Scotland took place during this period.

Between 500 and 1750, witchcraft in Europe was seen as a hybrid of sorcery and heresy. Whereas sorcery uses spells and rituals to try and create destructive supernatural phenomena, heresy is the Christian equivalent of witchcraft when a person strikes a deal with the Devil. Heresy also prevents witches from acknowledging fundamental Christian principles like Christ, baptism, salvation, and sacraments. Witch charges first surfaced in Europe in the 14th and 15th centuries, but as the 16th century brought forth societal unrest, the number of witchcraft trials increased. Between 1450 and 1750, there were an estimated 110,000 witchcraft trials in Europe (the height of persecution being between 1560 and 1660), with the accused

being hanged in half of the instances. In the fourteenth century, they witnessed a sharp increase in both the fear and knowledge of witchcraft. The fear turned into a more than 200-year-long frenzy by 1450. Legal penalties for witchcraft became more severe as the belief that all magic entailed a deal with the Devil expanded. Tens of thousands of individuals were put to death, while others suffered from imprisonment, torture, exile, and confiscation of their property. Though the majority was made up of men, the accused were easy; women made up the majority of those accused.

Witchcraft in Modern Europe

In Britain, interest in witchcraft increased over the 20th century. Margaret Murray popularised the 'witch-cult hypothesis' in the 1920s, postulating that persons who were condemned as 'witches' in early modern Europe were adherents of a benign pagan faith that had withstood the continent's Christianization. More historical studies have proven this to be false.

Witchcraft and nature worship are practises of the primarily Western Wicca movement, which considers itself a religion rooted in pre-Christian customs from northern and western Europe. Wiccans observe Halloween, the summer solstice, the spring equinox, revere nature, do ceremonial magic, call upon the assistance of deities, and worship the Goddess. Neo-Paganism was a rival movement that avoided the term "witch" while still worshipping the Goddess and engaging in witchcraft. At the start of the twenty-first century, Wiccans and Neo-Pagans were widespread in northern and western Europe and the English-speaking world. The rise of feminism, the popularity of science fiction and fantasy literature, the retreat of Christianity, the rise of deconstructionist and relativist theory, the emphasis on individuality and subjectivity, growing awareness of the symbolism of the unconscious, and growing tolerance for other religions are all contributing factors to the rise of Wicca and Neo-Paganism. Most contemporary Neo-Pagans reject theory and belief in favor of ritualistic expression of "symbolic and experiential" meanings because they are mistrustful of the demands of conventional faiths. Many Neo-Pagans would instead consider themselves to be practicing magic instead of religion, even if Neo-Paganism embraces the ritualistic and emotional aspects of religion into its heritage. Wiccans and Neo-Pagans enjoy the changing seasons and worry severely about the environment.

The Different Interpretations of the 'Weird Sisters' in On-Screen Adaptations
The name 'weird sisters' is found in most modern editions of Macbeth. However, the First Folio's text reads:

The Wayward Sisters, hand in hand,
Posters of the Sea and Land...

1.Throne of Blood (1958), directed by Akira Kurosawa:

According to Kurosawa, societal issues from the Middle Ages were similar in Scotland and Japan and could be applied to the modern day. In addition, Macbeth may be read as a warning story to accompany *Ikiru* (1952).

One of the main adjustments he made to Akira Kurosawa's rendition of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is the portrayal of the witch. Kurosawa changed the number of witches who gave the protagonist the prophecy from the original three to only one.

He also references the Greek Moira, or the three destinies (Moira is said to represent the threads of fate), by depicting the witch weaving a loom.

2.Macbeth (1971), directed by Roman Polanski:

Despite William Shakespeare composed the drama about 1603 (for King James). The drama takes place in a dark age in Scotland. Polanski uses this and bases his movie on this period. Unlike other filmmakers whose films are set in the Jacobean era, Polanski's account is more plausible because it was written. Tragedy is a central topic in Macbeth.

The opening scene establishes the significance of the witches. Act I, Scene 1, is set on a desolate beach with ominous noises by Polanski. The play's words are arranged differently in Polanski's adaptation. Using disgusting materials like a severed limb, the witches in the movie cast a spell. Given that beaches are where armies invaded Scotland during the Dark Ages, Polanski's decision to set this scenario on one illustrates how deeply he researched the historical details. The scenario opens with a stunning sunset, but just as the witches arrive. Maybe the witches are wicked ladies who play around with bringing someone down. Because of his goals, Macbeth is ready to believe anything the witches say, but he does not question the accuracy of their predictions. Since they make no requests in return, they may be simply waiting for him to make mistakes that will cause him to falter and ultimately cause his death. In contrast to the ideas of the Jacobean period, Polanski suggests that the witches have the power to alter Macbeth's psyche and that he is the one who alters the course of the play.

The film's vivid and brutal depictions were similar to Polanski's real life. Two years prior, Charles Manson and three other women had killed his wife, Sharon Tate. Several critics compared this to Macbeth's killings in the movie, which were carried out at the Three Witches' instigation.

3.Maqbool (2004), directed by Vishal Bhardwaj:

The inspectors Pandit and Purohit, who play the modified witches of Macbeth, are two characters that stick out for their significant roles in the narrative despite having limited scenes. In this Macbeth adaptation, Om Puri and Naseeruddin Shah respectively play the fortune-telling Panditji and his shooting companion Purohit, the two master manipulators of fate. They make appearances at pivotal points in the story to reveal the rules of the game and to offer Panditji's predictions, which seem to challenge the audience to deduce how the fate he has foreseen will come to pass rather than the characters, who will undoubtedly meet a cruel end. Panditji frequently makes specific forecasts that defy the rational expectations of other characters and allude to the paranormal. However, is he only an incredibly astute older man, or is he an astrologer par excellence? Thus, Inspectors Pandit and Purohit are aptly compared to the magical witches of Macbeth in the Bollywood don world.

4.The Tragedy of Macbeth (2021), directed by Joel Coen:

As the weird sisters, Kathryn Hunter twists her body into seemingly impossible shapes and speaks in a low, guttural rasp resulting from years of smoking cigarettes. Her interpretation of the Weird Sisters is hypnotic, unsettling, and genuinely weird, upending any preconceived notions you may have about what a

witch looks and sounds like. Because of Hunter's incredible ability to shape-shift like a bird while playing the witches in the film, some viewers even question whether special effects were used to enhance her portrayal. Many would believe that Joel improved her job with CGI, but that was different throughout filming.

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