THE WEIRD SISTERS

The following essay is reprinted from *The Views About Hamlet and Other Essays*. Albert Harris Tolman. New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1904. pp. 89-95.

Strangely enough the word *weird* has come into modern English entirely from its use in *Macbeth*. The word occurs six times in this play as usually printed: five times in the expression "weird sisters" (I. iii. 32; I. v. 8; II. i. 20; III. iv. 133; IV. i. 136), and once in the phrase "the weird women" (III. i. 2). Stranger still, _weird_ does not appear at all in the only authoritative text of the tragedy, that of the First Folio. In that edition the word is *weyword* in the first three passages in the play, and *weyard* in the last three. It was Theobold, the dearest foe of Pope, who saw that Shakespeare must have written *weird*, and that this rare word had been changed because of "the ignorance of the copyists." Modern editors accept the suggestion of Theobold; but I believe that the full force of the word *weird* is often unapprehended, even by special students of the play.

In Anglo-Saxon literature, "Wyrd" is the name of the personified goddess of fate. Wyrd is "the lord of every man." The word is also a common noun; each man has his own wyrd, or destiny.

In Chaucer we find these lines:

> "But O, Fortune, executrice of wierdes [fates, destinies]."
>
> Troilus and Criseyde, III. 617.

> "The Wirdes, that we clepen [call] Destinee."
>
> The Legend of Good Women, 2580 (IX. 19).

In the second of these lines we have a personification, but the conception is of more than one Wyrd.

A passage in the Scotch translation of Vergil's *Æneid*, written about 1513 by Gawin Douglas, Bishop of Dunkeld, translates "Parcæ" (Book III. 379) by the phrase "the werd sisteris."

Shakespeare's source for the story of Macbeth was Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, published in 1577. The evidence of this work is decisive in favor of

changing *weyward* and *weyard* to *weird*. The following passage from Holinshed will especially concern us:

"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, woondering 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 gouern the Scottish 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 thing came to passe as they had spoken."

In the Scandinavian mythology, as it was preserved in Iceland, "Urthr" was the eldest and the most prominent of the three Norns, or sister-Fates. The loss of an initial *w* disguises the identity of the word with the name of the Anglo-Saxon goddess of fate, "Wyrd." Both words are to be connected with the Latin *vertere*, the German *werden*, the Icelandic *vertha*, and the Anglo-Saxon *weorthan*. Apparently because the name "Urthr" is made from that form of the verbal stem which appeared in the plural of the past tense, this goddess came to be looked upon especially as the fate of the pase (*des Gewordenes*). Professor E. Mogk thinks that it was bungling word-play (*junges, isländisches Machwerk*) of the twelfth century which first gave to the two sisters of Urthr, the fates of the present and future, the names "Verthandi" (pronounced *werthandi--die Werdende_*, the goddess of that which is now *coming to be*--from the same verb as "Urthr") and "Skuld" (allied to *shall, soll*). The three Norns guard one of the three roots of Ygdrasil, the great Ash-tree of Existence. Urthr and Verthandi, the Past and Present, stretch a web from east to west, "from the radiant dawn of life to the glowing sunset, and Skuld, the Future, tears it to pieces."

"The weird sisters," therefore, is a phrase which means "the fate sisters," or the Sister

Fates. Schmidt's explanation of *weird*, in his "Shakespeare-Lexicon," as "subservient to Destiny," fails to bring out the dignity of the word both in Holinshed and Shakespeare. The weird sisters are not subservient to Destiny; they *are* Destiny.

The commentators have not noticed, apparently, that the weird sisters speak to Macbeth and Banquo in character, as the Norns of the Past, Present, and Future. This fact, which seems to be true in a general way of their speeches in Holinshed, comes out very clearly in Shakespeare.

> *Macbeth*. So foul and fair a day I have not seen.
> *Banquo*. How far is't call'd to Forres? What are these
> So wither'd and so wild in their attire,
> That look not like the inhabitants o' the earth,
> And yet are on't? Live you? or are you aught
> That man may question? You seem to understand me,
> By each at once her chappy finger laying
> Upon her skinny lips: you should be women,
> And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
> That you are so.
> *Macbeth*. Speak, if you can: what are you?
> 1. [Urthr, the Past.] All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, thane of Glamis!
> 2. [Verthandi, the Present.] All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, thane of Cawdor!
> [This title the king is now bestowing upon him, perhaps at this very instant.
> In Holinshed, it is 'shortlie after' the three women meet the two warriors that
> the king honors Macbeth by making him thane of Cawdor.]
> 3. [Skuld, the Future.] All hail, Macbeth, thou shalt be king hereafter!
>
> I. iii. 38-50.

It is not so plain that the three sisters speak in character in what is said to Banquo in the tragedy, but I do not think that we force the meaning if we interpret these speeches in the same way as the previous ones.

> *Banquo.* ...
> If you can look into the seeds of time,
> And say which grain will grow and which will not,
> Speak then to me, who neither beg nor fear
> Your favours nor your hate.
> 1. Hail!

2. Hail!

3. Hail!

1. [The Past.] Lesser [by birth] than Macbeth [the cousin of the king], and greater [in integrity, because he has been harbouring a wicked ambition].

2. [The Present.] Not so happy, yet much happier ['i.e., not so fortunate [as Macbeth in securing a present mark of honour], but much more blessed.' -- Schmidt].

3. [The Future.] Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none: So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo!

1. Banquo and Macbeth, all hail!

I. iii. 58-69.

It may be that Shakespeare's exact division of the rôles into Past, Present, and Future, is in a measure accidental, being suggested by Holinshed in the case of the speeches to Macbeth, and simply repeated in the words addressed to Banquo. It seems probable, however, that the careful distinction observed here between the three Norns is intentional. That "the weird sisters" are those "creatures of elder world," the mighty goddesses of destiny, can hardly be questioned. They are not called witches in the play itself, but always "the weird sisters" or "the weird women"; though one of them tells of the circumstances under which a sailor's wife said to her, "Aroint thee, witch!" (I. iii. 6). The only other use of the word *witch* in the text of the play occurs when a "witches' mummy" is mentioned (IV. i. 23) among the many uncanny things which, in the cauldron,

"Like a hell-broth boil and bubble."

The word *weird*, as has been said, was taken into modern English from *Macbeth*. Its significance, however, has not been understood. The word in its present use is an adjective, and has a range of meaning indicated by the words *wild, mysterious, uncanny, unearthly, ghostly; weird* in *Macbeth* was vaguely felt to express this combination of ideas. In the Scotch dialect of English the word has not died out, and retains the older meaning, *fate, destiny*. The word is common in Scott; for example, Meg Merrilies in *Guy Mannering* speaks often of the "weird," or destiny of Harry Bertram.

Back to William Shakespeare