

# **The Flattery of the Fates: A Sketch on the Three Witches in Macbeth and the Two Evil Sisters, Goneril and Regan, in King Lear**

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There are as many similarities with Shakespeare's plays Macbeth and King Lear as there are differences. While Macbeth portrays the steady decline of a nobleman through wild ambition and thirst for power, King Lear narrates the foolishness of an old king who decides to let go of his kingdom and power on the basis of publicly-declared praises. However, the downfall of both Macbeth and King Lear may be traceable to one parallel thing: their disability to distinguish between truth and flattery.

Macbeth's thirst for power can no longer be sated the moment he first turns his ears to the prophetic praises of the Three Witches: "All hail, Macbeth, hail to thee, Thane of Glamis! All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor! All hail, Macbeth! that shalt be king hereafter!" In like fashion, King Lear carelessly bows down to the false adulation of his two cunning daughters, Goneril and Regan, even going as far as dividing his kingdom between the two and banishing his favorite Cordelia, who possesses not the gift of words but the rarity of a true and honest heart. It was not so much Macbeth's ambition and King Lear's pride that drives them to their despair and deaths as their unexpected helplessness in the face of flattery. This vulnerability to praise so magnifies Macbeth's and King Lear's inherent self-conceit and arrogance that we, the readers, no longer remember what was once honorable and admirable in them. The words of American writer Dale Carnegie sum up these perils on flattery, more than 400 years after Shakespeare's memorable tragedies: *Flattery is telling the other person precisely what he thinks about himself.*

## **The Subtlety of the Three Witches**

Shakespeare describes the Three Witches in Macbeth as filthy and despicable creatures, "so withered and so wild in their



attire that they look not like the inhabitants of the earth.” These women, moreover, are depicted to be powerful, possessing the ability to summon tempests, conjure up visages of the future, and vanish at a wink. With their facility at prophesying, these Three Witches are often compared and contrasted with the Fates of Greek Mythology, the *Moirai*, composed of *Clotho*, the ‘spinner’, *Lachesis*, the ‘allotter’, and *Atropos*, the ‘unturnable’. Simply put, the Fates reiterate the certainty that anything already spun and allotted can no longer be turned or opposed. According to Wunderlich, the power of the Fates is typically upheld by the practice of witchcraft (290-291, 295-296), explaining thus the association of these three weird sisters with the Fates.

Nonetheless, it is the subtlety by which these three women deliver their flattery that holds more sway over Macbeth. Rather than promising Macbeth power or riches or fame or summoning visions of his imminent rise to power during that meeting at the heath, the Three Witches so ingeniously allows this man --- this man who has just gone to battle and has emerged victorious --- to feel what it may be like to be hailed as a king. Macbeth’s subsequent reaction to the flattery permits us to see his many dark and vulnerable layers beneath an exterior of valor and honor. Of no less interest, moreover, is Banquo’s nonchalant response to the flatteries of the Witches when he is hailed as “lesser than Macbeth, and greater.” While we may fault Banquo for having kept quiet despite his doubts on Macbeth’s innocence regarding King Duncan’s murder, his earlier reaction provides us a glaring contrast to the way Macbeth so easily buckled under the false praises of the Fates. By not being able to sift flattery from truth, Macbeth may have managed to murder his way to the throne but, in the end, he fails to achieve lasting power or peace.

## **The Devious Duopoly of Goneril and Regan**

Perhaps two of the most chilling villains in all of Shakespeare's plays are Goneril and Regan, the older daughters of King Lear. Both Goneril and Regan are guilty of many things: willfully abandoning their father, physically blinding an honorable earl, lusting after the same man, and turning against their own sister, Cordelia. For all of these crimes, however, these two evil sisters' most depraved offense is flattering an almost-senile king into foolish submission. What stamps this verbal obsequiousness with the label of crime is the fact that these two daughters are actually deceiving their own father. Considering the manner by which Goneril and Regan have injured King Lear, stripping him of his last vestiges of power just when he has neatly divided his kingdom between them, their smooth words in the beginning of the play later sound more condescending and sarcastic than plain foolish. Goneril confesses to love Lear "more than words can wield the matter, dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty" while Regan professes to 'love' in the same manner as her sister except that this love falls short compared to her own, since there is nothing else that makes her happy except Lear's love.

While we cannot blame Lear for his anger as regards Cordelia's discomfiting silence, we don't really feel sympathy for him when he decides to disinherit his favorite daughter and banish her from the kingdom. Even more so when this worthy and honorable king bows down to the false adulation of his self-serving daughters, tossing away the whole of his kingdom just as easily as he has pulled himself into this sticky web of honeyed words. It is at this point, after all, that King Lear first started to seal his sorry fate. Lear's foolish submission and subsequent violence (the disinheritance and banishment of Cordelia) is none too different with Macbeth's servility to the prophecies of the Three Witches and his plot after plot of murder just to be able to stay in power.

Goneril's and Regan's smooth maneuvering and deliberate deviousness, moreover, make them no less evil than The Three Witches or the Fates who, in Greek Mythology, reside in the underworld but control the lives of those who walk on the upper world. Aware of the worsening senility of their father and

even more aware of their own lofty ambitions, these two sisters contrive to control his life or what is left of it, even going to such great lengths as to rebuke anyone who shows the slightest opposition to their plans. Oftentimes described to be too devious to be considered credible, the characters of Goneril and Regan in King Lear have always invited introspection and plain disbelief. Yet, perhaps, Shakespeare has purposely made them to be such, endowing these two daughters with all the qualities of a fiend, royal hags in silken robes, so as to show us that no human character --- in literature or in real life --- will ever be capable of such treachery and heartlessness.

## **Of Flattery and Truth**

When the Three Witches and the two evil sisters Goneril and Regan heaped their praises on Macbeth and Lear, respectively, they were, simply put, flattering themselves and no one else. Theophrastus, the Greek philosopher and scholar upon whom Aristotle has bequeathed his written works, once defined flattery as “a base companionship which is most advantageous to the flatterer.” The witches knew that the only way for Macbeth to usurp the throne was to murder his way into it; Goneril and Regan knew how far their flattering words could take them and how vast a part of the kingdom all these will ensure them. There is no genuine advantage, therefore, for either Macbeth or King Lear when they decide to participate as unthinking audience to an elaborately-crafted play of words.

In the end, Macbeth and King Lear suffer the same fates: the loss of their kingdom and death. Macbeth loses a kingdom which has never been rightfully his while King Lear willingly gives up on a kingdom that was by all rights his. The fact that both plays are tragedies does not make this ending any more surprising. What invites perplexity, and ultimately acceptance, is the bitter reality that even the noblest, the greatest, and the most honorable of men know not how to draw the dividing line between flattery and truth.

## **WORK CITED**

Wunderlich, H.G. *The Secret of Crete*. London: Souvenir Press. 1975. Print