PLAYING WITH POWER:
HOW CONNECTIONS TO HECATE STRENGTHEN SUBVERSIVE WOMEN

A Thesis
by
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Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
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Abstract

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William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Thomas Middleton's *The Witch* are two English plays that consider the demonization of the domestic woman in early modern society, using the figure of the witch as a representation of these vilified figures. I argue that Hecate's addition to these plays offers new insights into early modern English thoughts on the threat of ambiguous figures and states of being, this ambiguity fighting against the patriarchal timeline in a way that threatens to break the social codes supporting and propagating the patriarchy.

In my research, I found that the domestic woman was feared for reasons that overlap with that of the witch: the image of the woman as mother particularly carries with it connotations of power that may be threatening to the function of the husband in the home, in turn questioning the reign of the man at the head of the community, all the way up through the hierarchies of society. I specifically discuss Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters from *Macbeth* as well as Francisca, Isabella, the Duchess, and Hecate from Middleton's tragicomedy as characters who emphasize specific cultural fears about the domestic woman

not aligning with patriarchal standards or with patriarchal categorizations. The liminality of their natures connects them with the threshold and witchcraft goddess Hecate, held in the early modern cultural imaginary as a figure specifically concerned with people caught in the in-between of one evolutionary category to the next.

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Dedication

For Hecate and the souls who follow her.

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Chapter 1: Playing with Power:

How Connections to Hecate Strengthen Subversive Women

"...yet we read in *malleo malleficarum*, of three sorts of witches;….One sort (they say) can hurt and not helpe, the second can helpe and not hurt, the third can both helpe and hurt….they can pull downe the moone and the starres….flie in the aire, and danse with divels….They can bring soules out of the graves." —Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, 5-6

Despite his personal skepticism, Reginald Scot provides a glimpse into early modern beliefs about witchcraft in his treatise *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584). The ideas presented in the above quote showcase three elements of a witch's believed arsenal of powers in the early modern period, given to her by the Devil himself. These powers appear often on the early modern stage—either explicitly or implicitly—as the theatre fed on the cultural fears of England. The power that a witch held in the early modern period was thought to be derivative of the Devil's; however, socially, witch figures held power because they subverted patriarchal categories, either proving difficult or refusing to be categorized. Such women were thought to be ruled by the goddess Hecate, known equally as the goddess of witchcraft and the goddess of thresholds.

Hecate—whose nature I will explore in more depth throughout my thesis—has a place in both William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606) and Thomas Middleton's *The Witch* (1616). I will argue throughout my thesis that her presence in these two plays shines light on the shadowy and ambiguous spaces of existence with which these plays both concern

themselves. *Macbeth* heavily contemplates female power and expressions thereof, grappling with the ambiguous gender identities of The Weird Sisters and Lady Macbeth alike. *The Witch* is concerned with gender role subversion and the space in-between patriarchally outlined categories for women to follow as they continue through life. Hecate's position as the goddess of journeying souls and the gatekeeper of liminal spaces forces readers to pay particular attention to such identities and spaces as we engage with the actions of these plays.

Early modern literature—dramas, pamphlets, treatises, and more—alluded to Hecate in numerous ways, either overtly or obscurely. The above quote from Scot, for example, mentions that witches come in three types. Over the course of my studies, I discovered that the number three often alluded to the mythological goddess, who is frequently portrayed as a goddess of three faces, having power over such spaces as Scot mentions here—the heavens, the earth, and the underworld. She was also considered the goddess of thresholds, of liminal spaces. The three-fold existence of Hecate and her power over and in-between mythological spaces is a pervasive idea that I find spanning cultural ideas about witchcraft and female power in the early modern period; recognizing her influence on early modern culture opened new doors of analysis of these two dramas. Hecate's impact on early modern representations of witches and powerful women—who are often viewed as analogous because both pervert patriarchal goals—is crucial to discussions about why such women were deemed threatening or terrifying, about from whence such women receive their power (even if the power is only social and not magical), and about concepts of liminal persons subverting patriarchal power.

My thesis explores concepts of liminal positions and identities that the women from William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606) and Thomas Middleton's *The Witch* (1616) take on

within the context of the goddess Hecate's reign over journeying spaces. The "journeying spaces" to which I sometimes refer recall the movement from one patriarchal category to the next. Often, these categories neatly align with Hecate's trinitarian nature: virgin, mother, and widow (O'Connor 1127). The female characters in these plays are somehow stuck between or exist outside of patriarchally sanctioned categories of being. Society's inability to contain or define them in a certain category makes them threatening and suggests that subversions of patriarchal structure are intolerable. In the case of Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters, the existence in a liminal or ambiguous space may be purposeful, but characters like Francisca and Isabella in Middleton's *The Witch* are liminal for reasons outside of their control. Whatever their motivation—or lack thereof—for being outside or in-between patriarchal categories, they are no less viewed as sinister. Scholarship on *Macbeth* has dealt with liminality to some extent but hardly ever within the context of Hecate, and scholarship on *The Witch* can rarely be found free from Shakespeare's influence, much less as a play holding important notions about Hecate's impact on ideas of female power. The appearance of Hecate in both of these plays is a strong connection that I find between them, and though I will be largely analyzing them separately, I will show that there is much to be said for early modern cultural ideas about Hecate, the goddess of thresholds.

Witchcraft studies is a multi-faceted and ever-evolving component of early modern studies. Much of the conceptual foundation for my thesis is predicated on the work of two particular scholars: Frances Dolan, her work *Dangerous Familiars* giving insight into the immediate threat of the woman in the domestic and social realms, and Deborah Willis, whose *Malevolent Nurture* is explicitly concerned with the ties between women and witch figures.

But researching witchcraft studies is a process, layers revealing themselves like peeling back the pages of time. Scholars hone in on a range of topics from the witchcraft trials—from court cases to representations of witchcraft on stage. Orna Alyagon Darr writes on the topic of procedures leading up to and following an accused woman's trial, discussing throughout her monograph, *Marks of an Absolute Witch,* the immediate ties between a woman, her body, and the eroticized nature of English witchcraft trials proceedings (29). Darr specifically notes the carnal nature of witchcraft trial proceedings in England, where they would pore over a woman's naked body in search of the elusive witch's mark or Devil's mark, a teat from whence the witch would suckle her demonic familiar (111-117). The witch's body was critical to the prosecution of a witch, as Diane Purkiss relates. She writes, "Magic and its remedies deal with borders, markers, distinctions, insides and outsides, the limits of bodies, and also that which breaches those boundaries; bodily fluids, exchanges of objects through bodies and across thresholds…" (*The Witch in History* 120). I will discuss extensively the liminality of the witch in the social order, but Purkiss's point also leads to ideas about the liminality of the witch's body itself: the constant shifting between magical and human realms, the relation with demonic figures, the exchange of "fluids." The immediate threat of the female body as a site that connected the magical, demonic realms to the human meant that many accusations were brought down on women, particularly those who were already in precarious societal situations. Eric Pudney notes, "The accused witches were disproportionately poor, and disproportionately female: almost 90 percent of them were women" (61). Marion Gibson explains in her introduction to *Women and Witchcraft in Popular Literature* that neighborly relationships turned sour among lower-class women often

led to accusations as cultural ideas about how a woman should keep her house and community came to the forefront of early modern thoughts (xiii). She continues by writing, "Often, therefore, witchcraft accusations were made over matters traditionally assigned to the female, domestic realm, and were made both by and against ordinary, lower-class women" (xiii). James Sharpe notes that because accused witches were sometimes widows, it was more likely for them "...not only to be poor but also to be outside husbandly control" (63). What stems from such revelations are thoughts about why it was so important for a woman to be under husbandly control.

I found that the woman was often silenced in early modern witch trials—and in day-to-day life as well. The domestic woman's place in this society was teetering on the edges of powerful and subordinate, for as Susan C. Staub writes, "Although [the woman] seemed to have a unique power within the domestic sphere, she was pictured as subject to her husband" ("Early Modern Medea" 334). The question of a woman's authority and power was one fraught with condemnation for the woman's voice and capabilities. Purkiss writes that the testimonies of accused women were not accepted as true stories during the witchcraft trials—this female voice was silenced, insulted by the immediate patriarchal society and further rejected by later feminist critics who viewed these women "...as mere mouthpieces of a patriarchal elite" (*The Witch in History* 91). There is no question about the woman's subjugated position in early modern English society. According to Gibson, even pamphlet literature was specifically constructed so as to propagate the idea of the state's power, and furthermore, such questions about author intentionality directly affect the way readers perceive the characters in the pamphlet (*Early Modern Witches* 2-5). Willis also

acknowledges the shifting concerns of the patriarchal elite in the early modern era, which caused new pressures to be administered on villagers who represented a faction of the society unwilling to uphold the monarch's rule or the Protestant beliefs of the nation (83-84). As I approached *The Witch* and *Macbeth*, I was not surprised to find representations of women—poor women, maternal women, women who withdrew their loyalty to the patriarchy—as inherently threatening.

On the stage, women who subverted patriarchal categorization or standing societal expectations of the woman were frequently called witches or indirectly associated with the witch figure, and this figure became a popular subject for playwrights as both cultural fascination with and fear of the witch grew. Robert Lima asserts that, though the Weird Sisters were the most well-known witches from the Elizabethan and Jacobean stages—and probably still are—witch figures were predominant in plays from the period (201). Daniel Albright notes the deep, cultural effect that the witches from *Macbeth* had on early modern society and how these witches on stage changed English understandings of the power of the witch (145). Diane Purkiss reminds readers that other Shakespeare plays included witches, too—not just *Macbeth* ("Witchcraft in Early Modern Literature" 130). She explores the clear contextualization of witches on the early modern stage, "...recognising its place in a contest of meanings, seeing it as taking sides in a series of overt and covert disputes" (*The Witch in History* 180). The disputes in question span from female social power to truly demonic power, both kinds of power that were feared and that the patriarchal society of the time often attempted to snuff out. I consider this here because, moving forward, I will often mention the

ways that witches on the stage are parodies or monstrous portrayals of the women who epitomize threat for early modern patriarchal society.

Off of the stage, witches can be succinctly described as those who subvert patriarchal status quo, whether male or female. Witchcraft was viewed as a deviant act by the elite members of society, although witchcraft beliefs were pervasive and extended throughout all tiers of early modern life (Sharpe 58). What we often find is that the site of witchcraft accusations was so closely enmeshed with the domestic sphere—which was known as the woman's sphere—that the two became inextricably linked. Chris Laoutaris explains that the exchanging of goods between women often made connections between the domestic realm—"wifely and maternal work"—and witchcraft an easy jump (160). He writes,

> An accusation of *maleficium*, made by a woman refusing to participate in the exchange of commodities with a neighbor, could allow the housewife to avoid a crisis in her view of herself as capable mother or nurturer if the suspected witch could be grouped among the class of masterless citizens who were deemed to be a threat to the commonwealth. (163)

Accusations of *maleficium*, a word used to denote diabolic or ill-willed witchcraft, were made on the grounds of domestic issues almost invariably. Marion Gibson warns us to be leery of fantastical early modern accounts found in pamphlets, for though witchcraft was a widely held belief, pamphlets do not always reveal whole truths about a particular case (*Reading Witchcraft* 4-5). Gibson writes that a witch is not defined by her ability to manifest infernal power but, instead, "...is...a person defined as such by his or her society…," meaning that the definition and cultural significance of the moniker "witch" must be detailed by the

immediate society in which the accused witch exists (*Reading Witchcraft* 5). Malcolm Gaskill concurs, writing that Elizabethan witchcraft cases, although less pervasive than popular culture suggests, were often the by-product of "causal factors," including but not limited to a lack of neighborliness and suspicious community deaths ("Witchcraft Trials in England" 284). By accusing another woman who refused to exchange goods in a neighborly fashion with her of witchcraft, as Laoutaris writes, a woman could ostensibly account for her shortcomings by alleging that the other woman began the squabble. Key word choices in this quote from Laoutaris are "masterless" and "commonwealth." Remember that Sharpe tells us that accused women were often outside of "husbandly control," meaning they are not only without a master but they are also a threat to the mini-commonwealth of the home (63). Garthine Walker notes, "The presentation of the household as little commonwealth conflated personal and public authority and Christian vision in which the rule of husbands, fathers, magistrates, ecclesiastics and monarchs each legitimated that of the others" (9). Any subversion of this hierarchy could be viewed as an act of defiance. Women were subjugated for religious and social reasons, and threatening such a hierarchy questioned the rule of their husband over his home and, in turn, questioned every other male ruler of the city, state, and country. And it was particularly women who were accused of questioning and threatening this rule because of the ambiguous territory that their power as mothers gave them.

One of the most important connections scholars make about witches and women in the period is their link with maternity. In conjecturing why early modern English witch hunts largely targeted women, Deborah Willis posits that "Witches were women, I believe, because women are mothers: witchcraft beliefs encode fantasies of maternal prosecution" (6). The

most salient reason why women were viewed as threatening was due to what Willis describes as "...a malevolent, persecutory power associated with the mother's body, voice, or nurturant role[, which is] a central feature of her ability to threaten order" (8). The mother, one of the essential stages a woman was expected to evolve into over the course of her lifetime, is undoubtedly connected directly to a kind of power that only a woman could exert. Three of the female characters I will be exploring—Lady Macbeth and Middleton's Francisca and Hecate—are either characterized as or clearly represented as mothers on the stage; these women—most pointedly, Hecate and Lady Macbeth—are made out to be especially vicious. Even more definitively, Lady Macbeth's speeches about her desire to be stripped of motherly abilities and motherly love and empathy align with early modern concerns about a mother's potential to harm a child as a way to showcase her power to her community or exercise it over her husband. Infanticide, the act of killing babies, or filicide, the act of killing small children, were areas in which fears about maternal power and fears about the power of witches directly overlap. A mother might kill her children for reasons such as spousal abuse or disagreement surrounding religion, ruining the possibility for patrilineal expansion, as Josephine Billingham relates (222). Witches derived power from infernal sources. In both cases, the woman was thought to be under the temptation of the Devil. Specifically for mothers, infanticide and filicide had resounding effects in the household and the community. Dianne Berg writes, "A woman who killed her offspring rejected, abandoned and ultimately reversed her political and 'natural' roles in the production of a stable and godly family, household, and community: a *monstrous unmaking* in which her material female energy disrupted power structures conceptualised as male" (419, emphasis added). The "monstrous

unmaking" that Berg mentions alludes to the inversion of cultural expectations of feminine tropes: the good mother, the submissive wife. To use Willis's word, "malevolent" mothers and witches illustrate ideas that find women in places of power—and often this power was seen as ill begotten—which was an uncomfortable thought in early modern England. Therefore, women in these places of power were often vilified. And the vilified mother was seen throughout early modern pamphlets and plays almost as much, if not equally as much, as the demonic witch.

Frances E. Dolan extends the association of witches with mothers and the domestic space but does so by playing on the notion of the "familiar." As Dolan explains, not only is the term "familiar" explicitly used to refer to a witch's demon pet—a malevolent spirit that has taken the form of some kind of earthly creature, such as a spider or a cat—but it can also refer to familiar people, people who are part of the domestic space and who are closely connected to the family or community. For Dolan, the mother figure poses the greatest potential threat to the husband's authority in the home, and it is this concept of familiarity that connects her to the witch. Familiar threats could also emerge from community members who directly endangered the patriarchal system of the community in some way, such as by questioning male authority and control; oftentimes, these were the people who were most susceptible to witchcraft accusations (*Dangerous Familiars* 3-4). The domestic sphere as depicted in these plays becomes a war zone as women push back against their husbands' or male family members' orders or wishes.

My work focuses on feminist critiques of *Macbeth* and *The Witch*, both dramas that deal with the restrictions early modern women faced due to their patriarchal society. I will

explore the cultural understandings of the female position in society on the early modern stage, considering representations of domestic women in particular as they are made analogous with the witch figure. As I will illustrate, the witch figure comes to epitomize the power a woman can take up outside of the patriarchal categories women were forced into over their lives. As women who exist in journeying spaces, Lady Macbeth, the Weird Sisters, Isabella, Francisca, and the Duchess all exemplify the power of liminality that exists outside of and in-between patriarchal categories. Their depiction in the plays shows how such power is demonized and contextualized as witchcraft.

Ancient identifications of the witchcraft goddess Hecate with three-fold existence align identically with early modern patriarchal constructions of the categorical stages women were thought to experience throughout their lifetimes. Each evolutionary point in the woman's timeline was meant in some way to be meaningful and practical for the societal system of early modern England. Virginity was important before marriage; motherhood was critical for patrilineal succession and the continuation of the patriarchal society; the crone symbolized the full completion of a woman's timeline, though this evolutionary point was often understood as the end of a woman's ability to contribute to her society. But as many portrayals in early modern English plays demonstrate, such as the characters from *Macbeth* and *The Witch*, witches were often associated with existing outside of these patriarchally sanctioned categories. As such, they were liminal figures.

Liminality is discussed by Victor Turner in terms of anthropological origin as sites where members of one society are going through change. He writes, "This term, [liminality,] literally 'being-on-a-threshold,' means a state or process which is betwixt-and-between the

normal, day-to-day cultural and social states and processes of…" life ("Frame, Flow and Reflection" 465-466). Turner defines "state" as a socially coded "condition" ("Liminality and Communitas" 94). The concept of different states or positions in a society allows for the rhetorical maneuvers which follow, the conversation about the spaces in-between the states. I have adopted this consideration of liminality in my own work, thinking about liminal states as the journeying spaces I defined earlier. Turner elaborates on liminality in a way that aligns with my own ideas about places in-between early modern patriarchal categories. Developing the work of folklorist Arnold van Gennep, Turner summarizes the three stages of cultural liminality: "(1) separation (from ordinary social life); (2) margin or limen (meaning threshold), when the subjects of ritual fall into a limbo between their past and present modes of daily existence; and (3) re-aggregation, when they are ritually returned to secular or mundane life…" ("Frame, Flow and Reflection" 466-67). Turner writes that during the marginal phase of this evolution, "...the state of the ritual subject...is ambiguous; he passes through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" ("Liminality and Communitas" 94). The female characters that we encounter in *Macbeth* and *The Witch* experience all of these stages except for the last, *re-aggregation*, the crucial step of moving out of liminality and back into culturally supported roles in society. By continuing to exist in the space of liminality, they invite fear, and this fear often turns to aggression—for we will see the ways the male characters, particularly from *The Witch*, forcibly place these female characters back into their patriarchal social categories, making them more comfortable to digest. *Macbeth*, instead of forcing these female characters into their proper categories, simply does away with these threatening women. As the goddess of thresholds,

according to Sarah Iles Johnston, Hecate would take particular interest in the characters that I discuss (207).

From the Latin *limen*, “liminal,” meaning “threshold,” is an important concept in my thesis, for I have taken particularly the understanding of Hecate as the goddess of thresholds and applied it to the liminal identities the female characters I explore often take upon themselves (*OED*, “liminal,” def A2). Particularly in my chapter on *Macbeth*, and at other points in this thesis, I have used the words “liminal” and “ambiguous” interchangeably, a word usage that I will explain further in my next chapter. Additionally, I will discuss at length the connection between Hecate’s powerful position as a goddess of thresholds and journeying spaces as making her particularly concerned with the ambiguous spaces that Lady Macbeth, the Weird Sisters, Isabella, Francisca, and the Duchess from Middleton’s *The Witch* come to inhabit. Though the Hecate figure of *Macbeth* and *The Witch* rarely impacts major plot points in the dramas, as I will repeatedly assert, her appearance in the plays points back to such understandings of not only constructions of female existence within patriarchal societies but also the power of liminal spaces. That the women in these plays are *meant* to fulfill certain evolutionary points on the female patriarchal timeline yet never completely fit into the three categories of female productivity in society is no mistake in light of Hecate’s addition to these plays. Their constant resistance to identification and categorization means that they hold power where society has denied them access. Such existence in in-between spaces causes fear and threatens patriarchal hierarchies of the home and of the community. The threats of the ambiguous identities presented in these characters will always be crushed, and the women are either forced to conform to patriarchal understandings of feminine roles

or are completely destroyed. The fears regarding the power held by the women of these plays perhaps exist because of the strengthening agent that is Hecate's presence.

The conception of the goddess Hecate in early modern English cultural thought centered on her particular interest in women and liminal or ambiguous spaces. Notably, women in the early modern period were thought to go through three phases in their lives. The number three, as I mentioned, was associated with Hecate, particularly within the three categories of female life in early modern England. There are different life stages in this evolution—one of which may be described as virgin, mother, and widow—but the notion is almost always the same: a woman's humanity is tied with her productivity within the patriarchy. Once she abandons these roles, she becomes either threatening or nothing. And though the concept of these women becoming nothing due to their refusal to categorically align with patriarchal concepts is an important one, I am more interested in the threat they cause. I have combined ideas about Hecate's equal interest in female affairs and liminal bodies and spaces in order to deliver a deeper analysis on the space between early modern categorizations of female life cycles, pointing towards the appearance of Hecate in the plays I have chosen as the guiding force behind my theory that ambiguous identities are threatening to patriarchal structures.

Theory about liminality and identity crises within *Macbeth* and *The Witch* bridges the gap between my understanding of Hecate as the gatekeeper to new analytical views about these plays and what has been done before. Theoretical frameworks of monstrous identities, those that exist outside of social order and are thus repudiated by society, explain the dark approach to witches and witchcraft in early modern culture. Furthermore, liminal or

ambiguous identities have been the site of theoretical works that deal with gender subversion or gender breakthroughs, concepts that I repeatedly consider. Identity theories exist behind the scenes of my analyses moving forward; these theorists help motivate and explain my readings.

I have spoken some about monstrous identities because the theses behind monster theory as expressed by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen align with the monsters early modern people created out of witches and women. Some of the tenets of "Monster Culture" that are important to consider are the monster's body as a cultural creation that cannot exist outside of a certain context (4); the monster's refusal to be easily categorized (6); the attraction of a monstrous identity as a way of breaking free from societal norms and enforcements (16); and finally, the monster's ultimate question: *Why have you created me?* (20). This last challenge asks those who are exploring cultural and social conventions of creating monstrous identities why certain identities are considered "monstrous." In the case of early modern English culture—particularly on the stage—ambiguous identities refuse easy categorization, and categorizations are most easily placed on female bodies since they were often thought to adhere to a stricter life timeline. Furthermore, the witch figure encapsulates early modern fears about women and mothers in particular, whose place in the domestic sphere was contemporaneously being reconsidered, a historical moment that I will discuss in my third chapter on *The Witch*. Monster theory, which has been used to analyze monsters in films as well as culturally-coded "monstrous" identities, takes a new direction in my arguments and informs the course I have taken with witch figures and ambiguous spaces. In the cases of

these plays, it is the female characters who are continuously coded as monsters because of their refusal to adhere to the three patriarchally sanctioned roles.

These evolutionary stages of the early modern woman's life that I have been discussing within the context of Hecate's three-faced identity is paralleled in Luce Irigaray's conceptions of societal expectations for women, too. She writes,

> The tale of women's sexual history is suspended before woman reaches adulthood. Before even the onset of puberty is touched on. Before, that is, the "discovery of the vagina," and the womb? Before woman leaves her family, changes her proper name, marries, has children, nurses them. All rather crucial stages. As are others. (112)

The question mark after "the womb" is an interesting decision—either on the part of Irigaray or the translator, Gillian C. Gill—as it brings to the forefront the questions that Lady Macbeth and Francisca—from *Macbeth* and *The Witch*, respectively—ask audiences to consider in terms of a woman's usefulness to society. Within the context of marriage, a woman is expected to produce heirs for her husband, which Lady Macbeth fails to do within the confines of her play's timeline—more than this, she asks to be stripped entirely of her opportunity to ever be able to bear anything but malice (*Macbeth* 1.5.38-41, 45-46, 50-52). Outside of the context of marriage, a woman is never expected to become or to be accepted as a mother, so Francisca's pregnancy as an unwedded woman causes deep psychological turmoil for her as she considers the potential punishment her brother will inflict on her (*The Witch* 2.1.58, 59). Both of these women and the other female characters that I write on in *Macbeth* and *The Witch* cannot be categorized—by what early modern people would deem as—*properly*. These "crucial stages" are either skipped over, rejected, or not yet fulfilled,

even though they should be, and this in many ways not only makes these women threatening forces in a highly structured and critical patriarchal society but also makes them "inert," to repeat Irigaray's word, or useless. Such figures that existed on the outside of social usefulness could also become synonymous with figures that threatened the social status quo or subverted commonly accepted ideas of female placement in society—figures such as the witch, who appear in both *Macbeth* and *The Witch*.

My first chapter will explore concepts of ambiguous identity in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* within the context of the goddess Hecate, concentrating mostly on Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters as people who inhabit liminal identities and spaces. Due to their ambiguous personhood, these figures are seen as threatening, are often shown to be terrifying and mysterious, and immediately undermine patriarchal concepts of specifically feminine identity. The Weird Sisters are outwardly ambiguous in that they are presented as androgynous figures who, as Banquo notes, may or may not even be human in their essence. Lady Macbeth's ambiguous identity is centered more on the subversion of socially acceptable inhabitance of patriarchally defined female categories, such as wife, mother, and widow. This play is driven by the desires and power of the ambiguously feminine and male-coded characters of Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters, much to the discomfort of the male characters in this play. Conversations about *Macbeth* seem to be impossible without discussion of witchcraft and its place in the play, but what is so curious is that these characters, despite not being characterized as witches within the actual play text, are often discussed in terms of witchcraft. This can be viewed as a way that cultural understandings of

subversive women are connected with witch figures, figures like Hecate, figures that will also appear in *The Witch*.

Thomas Middleton's *The Witch* is another play that offers examples of women who exist outside the early modern code of female conduct. The inclusion of a Hecate figure in this play presses us to consider the power that can be held in liminal spaces and states of being, even though Middleton's representation of Hecate undercuts her mythological standing by showing her as an ineffective practitioner of *maleficium*. Isabella, Francisca, and the Duchess—the main characters of the aristocratic, domestic plotline of this comedy—*should* align directly with early modern concepts of virginity, motherhood, and crone, respectively, but they do not. The unwillingness of their characters to be satisfactorily defined by the socially accepted female categories explains why they are such threats to the men in their play. The fact that any attempt—conscious or subconscious—to exist outside of female categories is successfully stamped out by one of the male characters of the play is further proof that ambiguity is not only intolerable but also threatening in the early modern cultural consciousness. My argument in this chapter hinges on the interconnectedness of the goddess Hecate's standing as virgin, mother, and crone with early modern English conceptions of "proper" ladyship, but I also explore the ways that Hecate's liminal power further pushes readers to deeply consider identities that are ambiguous as identities that are seen as inherently evil and threatening to patriarchal order.

Chapter 2: Liminal Ladies:

Discussing the Ambiguity from whence Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters Gain Power

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* presents female characters who do not remain within socially acceptable structures. Lady Macbeth is a wife but oversteps the early modern ideas of wifedom, and she also speaks into existence her roles as mother and witch, further complicating our understanding of her based solely on her actions. The Weird Sisters dwell on some plain outside of human existence, which muddles not only our understanding of them as women but also our understanding of them as human. As such, both Lady Macbeth and the witches exist in-between spaces. They are liminal characters. I will be exploring the ideas of liminality throughout *Macbeth* to showcase the ways that Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters gain power based on their existence within these liminal personhoods.

As I explained in my introduction, the concept of liminality that my ideas will be springing from is that used by Victor Turner. In anthropology, the word "liminal" describes a key phase in rites of passage ("Liminality and Communitas" 95). However, in this chapter, I am using it to suggest what Turner characterizes as a state "Betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" ("Liminality and Communitas" 95). To reiterate, the principal state of social journeying—moving from one category to the next—that the female characters I discuss are missing is that of re-aggregation, when, instead of ritually re-entering social normativity, a character is caught in the "limbo" between one stage and the next ("Frame, Flow and Reflection" 466-467). Turner also considers stage dramas as particularly "liminoid," meaning that they have the

ability to showcase liminality, rather than expressing it themselves, in the sense that staged dramas allow for the exploration of an "...escape from the classifications of everyday life, symbolic reversals, destruction...of social distinctions…" ("Frame, Flow and Reflection" 491). Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters, among other characters and situations in Macbeth that display and deal with questions of ambiguous nature and liminality, explicitly perform the very escape from social categorization that Turner discusses by embodying the power that the goddess Hecate affords liminal figures.

The Weird Sisters represent the socially alienated crones that were often recipients of witch accusations, and Lady Macbeth, while also aligning herself with witchcraft beliefs of the time, sinisterly revokes any identity as a mother. In relinquishing their stable categorizations for the liminal identities they take up, these characters become volatile for the patriarchal society within which they exist. And though scholarship and popular culture often label Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters as witches and mothers (or motherly figures), we will come to find that their identity within the play being defined as neither of those things further conveys the power of liminal states.

Two identities that epitomize early modern English anxieties about female power were those of the mother and the witch, and as I briefly discussed in my last chapter, these two spaces became inextricably linked in early modern culture. Both Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters, however, dismiss their society's desire for them to neatly fit into the categories of female life—virgin, wife, or widow/crone. They fulfill some of this should-be identity, but they also fulfill roles outside of their should-be categories, roles that would have been

assigned to men, for example. They exist in ambiguous spaces because of their realities of being and not-being.

The liminality that Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters demonstrate, then, can be best explained as a by-product of their ambiguity; liminality and ambiguity are not the same states of being, but I will often be discussing them simultaneously in this thesis. According to Turner's conceptions of liminality, the stage after marginal existence is re-aggregation (467), as I mentioned earlier, but neither the Weird Sisters nor Lady Macbeth ever motion towards a return to or an entry into another patriarchal stage. Their ambiguity is forcibly made liminal and discussed as such because early modern readers and viewers of the play would have been more comfortable with an identity that has the ability to perform, eventually, its social function. They are ambiguous—existing in the permanent state of a destabilized personhood—yet they are depicted as liminal, as threshold beings. They remain in the "limbo" stage for longer than is socially acceptable, resisting change and rejecting patriarchal standards. The discomfort of ambiguity is traded for liminality, a function of patriarchal evolutionary models in which the Weird Sisters and Lady Macbeth neither want to nor ever will take part. Because they reject patriarchal categorization, their liminality has been represented on the stage repeatedly as evil.

To be clear, my argument does not revolve around evil as a condition of liminality, but it does suggest that a patriarchal society, which depends upon women to exist in the categorical spaces they have been assigned, would deem deviance from this status quo as evil, for it breaks down the hierarchical power structure that ensures the proliferation of patriarchy. The Weird Sisters and Lady Macbeth are often portrayed as and understood as

evil, as monstrous representations of the farthest direction from patriarchal guidelines that women can go, and their threat to patriarchal structures throughout the play certainly secures them in the early modern consciousness as evil figures.

There may be an understandable historical reason for this representation of the women from Macbeth as evil. Joanna Levin, whose argument I will discuss more in-depth later, explains that Lady Macbeth represents the ambiguous state of women in the early seventeenth century, a time when bewitched women became re-defined as “hysterics” (22-24). This suggests a cultural shift in understanding of women as figures of threat towards a perception of women as docile, fretting persons who are perhaps more susceptible to mental instability (38-39). Both Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Turner agree that monstrous identities and liminal figures are born of a time of shifting cultural understandings of what that figure or identity should do or represent (38, 478). This cultural shift partially explains the perception of witches as threatening in two distinct ways: as potentially harmful to the “behaving” woman, a woman who remains in her dedicated patriarchal category—in whatever patriarchal stage: virgin, mother, or widow/crone—and as potentially threatening to the patriarchy itself. I believe that for this reason, through a patriarchal lens, liminality could certainly be viewed as inherently evil because it violates the codes set forth in order to uphold the power structure of such a society. Witches and mothers are evil for this same reason, that they threaten pre-existing societal structure. The undercurrents driving the fear about witches, most famously, and mothers, a topic that has been vastly explored in early modern scholarship, were fraught with unease about women in places of power, spaces where women had the capability of threatening the social hierarchy and patriarchy, not only

in the household but also of the broader community. In early modern thought, a woman's connection with her children—including but not limited to the act of breastfeeding—created the opportunity for her to corrupt these children against their father, the community, or the church, as Stephanie Chamberlain explains (73). A deviant mother was also thought to deny her responsibilities in this domestic space—often prompted by the Devil to do so—further putting the family line at risk by murdering her offspring or her husband (or both) (77). Other literature from the early modern period—such as the pamphlet *A Pittilesse Mother who most unnaturally at one time murthered two of her own children at Acton within six miles of London*, written about Margaret Vincent—also illustrates women as especially vulnerable to the deceit of the Devil. Although this pamphlet attributes Vincent's murder of her children to religious piety, the title page shows her being goaded by the devil to strangle her children (Staub, *Nature's Cruel Stepdames*, 62-63). This is another way that mothers and witches were aligned—their connection with and relationship to the Devil.

Though witches were often shown as involved with the Devil on the stage, their cultural power is actually a by-product of the close ties they share with the domestic woman, the lady of the house. Lady Macbeth's crimes against her husband—that she subordinates him within his own household—are more domestic than religious, which might complicate her appearance on stage as demonic if it were not for the way that her threat ties in with scholarly thoughts about the danger of female power being most looming while in the home, in the threatening space of the "familiar" (Dolan 3-4).

The mother, the wife, and the eventual widow were fulfillments of the evolutionary timeline of a woman in early modern England—common conceptions and common sights in

the culture. Deviance from this path caused so much social discord in the rigid patriarchal society of the time that mothers, wives, or widows who exhibited deviance were demonized. As I pointed out in my introductory chapter, the possibility that the woman in the home or in the community might at any moment reject the social status quo caused fear. On early modern English cultural thoughts about the threat of the familiar—a concept connected not only to the demonic spirits disguised as pet cats, snakes, spiders, and others but also to the idea of the woman in the house as a familiar threat—Frances Dolan writes, "[In] representations of domestic crime, the threat usually lies in the familiar rather than the strange, in the intimate rather than the invader" (4). Such fears led to representations of these women in monstrous identities, such as the witch.

As we have seen, Deborah Willis's notion that the witch figure was closely tied to the figure of the mother is an inescapable reality of the culture that contextualizes *Macbeth* (6). Willis goes on to note that Shakespeare's *Macbeth* particularly showcases women manipulating men, "by both magical and nonmagical means," converting them to "dependent and powerless children" (8). Such "nonmagical means" are likely the social disruptions I have been discussing so far and will continue to discuss within the context of the female characters in not only *Macbeth* but also *The Witch*. Dympna Callaghan also ruminates on the power of the mother, particularly within the context of female power as it was created by—in being oppressed by—the patriarchy, writing that a "crucial cultural [conflict]" is the "one between patriarchy and the rule of mothers…" (357). Janet Adelman likewise discusses the cross section of witchly and motherly power in Macbeth: "Maternal power...is not embodied in the figure of a particular mother…; it is instead diffused throughout the play, evoked

primarily by [the Weird Sisters] and Lady Macbeth" (4). Macbeth is a play that demonstrates the height of these anxieties about maternal power being reminiscent or precursors to the power of witchcraft.

Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters, for many scholars, such as Callaghan, represent manipulative motherly figures for Macbeth as he reaches for power and glory (359). The cultural attitudes towards women as "in charge" of the domestic realm yet lesser to the husband in all things is challenged exponentially as the Weird Sisters and Lady Macbeth repeatedly shape Macbeth's decisions and actions—hence why they are illustrated as witches even though the play never explicitly characterizes them as such. The witch stood as an emblem of the woman as powerful, as having agency, as threatening the power of the man of the house or the men of the community—or even patriarchy in general. The power that Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters evince is constantly challenging and challenged by the power of the patriarchy—namely the power of Macbeth as Lady Macbeth's husband, as the Weird Sisters' master, and as the King. The struggle for power in *Macbeth* is not only exhibited by Macbeth as he strives for ultimate control of his kingdom, but it is also demonstrated by the subversiveness that Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters express, subversiveness that is buttressed by the three-faced goddess Hecate.

The Weird Sisters are the first illustration of the importance of the number three in *Macbeth*—most readily evident is their power as a triple-personed force, but they also come in close contact with the trinitarian goddess Hecate, who, I find, is the source of not just their physical abilities but also of their cultural influence. As noted in my introduction, the number three came to be indicative of the ruling power of Hecate, whose appearance in this play

opens the gateway to discussions about liminality. R.S. White notes that characters in *Macbeth* often seem to fit neatly into three categories, “the good, bad and indifferent,” upon first glance, but very quickly they show themselves as existing between certain states of being, or as his essay explains, “...the good are not wholly good, the bad not wholly bad, and the indifferent are like the Weird Sisters, standing inscrutably apart and disinterested in human affairs, neither good nor bad” (62). Not only does the three-fold schema that White posits connect deeply with discussions of Hecate that I will conduct later in this essay, but his idea of the Weird Sisters as set apart from “human” affairs—save his commentary that they are “neither good nor bad”—suggests that they are not human themselves, which relates to my readings of them as well. And discussions of liminality do not end there: Lady Macbeth particularly exists in states of witch and not-witch, mother and not-mother, subservient wife and patriarchally subversive wife. Liminality in *Macbeth* does not only revolve around gender roles but includes even broader ideas in its ambiguity, such as human and non-human. Ideas about liminality in this play are shaped by the goddess Hecate, without whom the discussion of liminal figures and spaces falls flat.

Hecate’s introduction into this play has long been a source of confusion in scholarship, as illustrated by the stark lack of scholarship that includes her as an important gateway to analysis. Though some scholars argue that Shakespeare had no hand in writing the Hecate scenes—that, instead, it was Thomas Middleton (Albright 142)—the goddess’s addition to *Macbeth* is crucial to my argument. Persons existing in this space of being and not-being were often understood in the early modern mythological consciousness to be ruled by the goddess Hecate. Because my reading focuses so heavily on ambiguity and liminality

as states of power, it is essential to understand the ways that the identity of Hecate is entwined with ideas of restlessness, near-completion, and halfway points. Her appearance in *Macbeth*, as I discussed in the introduction to this thesis, drives our readings of the play as a drama that considers power in these ambiguous spaces. Furthermore, Hecate's appearance in this play allows us to analyze liminality on a deeper cultural level—relating to the precipice that women in the early modern era existed upon, wherein they were both powerful and subservient, especially in the home—rather than only focusing on the ambiguities the play sets forth.

According to Barbara G. Walker, Hecate was a trinitarian goddess, her conception predating Christian doctrine of the God-Head Three-in-One. She was known as a goddess of three aspects almost always: the three-way street, the three life stages of women (as in virgin, mother, and crone), and three celestial arenas (as in heaven, earth, and hell) (378-379). Hecate is a goddess of liminality, of spaces that are constantly evolving and shifting. In a note on Hecate's classical standing, Robert Lima shares that the goddess's "trinitarian nature" as a goddess of the moon, earth, and underworld is "a metaphor for the heavenly body's journey from the sky to the earth and into the underworld" (219). Just as I will later discuss in my chapter on *The Witch*, Hecate rules specifically over the women in this play, even if only metaphorically. Though her character does not influence the action of the play immediately, only appearing in a few scenes and always only either to scorn or bolster the Weird Sisters' hand in Macbeth's fate, her presence here allows a deeper reading of liminality as a place of power for women who often led very structured lives, lives that were patriarchally divided into the three-part timeline of virgin, mother, and widow. Hecate's

guidance through the journey between these rigid boundaries supports the Weird Sisters' and Lady Macbeth's threat to the patriarchy, for we can begin to dissect the ways that a goddess's power in ambiguous realms also allows the women she watches over to exist in these transitional places for longer periods of time, their human importance no longer being determined by whether or not they exist in one of these patriarchally defined categories of importance.

As Sarah Iles Johnston notes, Hecate was the leader of restless souls who were left somewhere at the halfway point between total, peaceful rest in death and their places on earth (204). Oftentimes, Hecate was associated with women who were in a place of transition, and "because women's roles in life were more sharply defined[,...women] were thus more likely to die in a state considered incomplete" (249). Hecate's appearance in this play naturally leads us to a consideration of the position of the Weird Sisters and Lady Macbeth as members of this coven of ambiguous figures. Often not one of the outstanding aspects of *Macbeth* to readers, play-goers, or scholars, the goddess's appearance is pivotal within the discussion of the power found in ambiguity when female societal categorizations are pushed against or broken.

Though I have written that Hecate has little impact on the major plot points of this drama, her linguistic patterns point towards liminal spaces and a sense of vague dread about the tragedy that is yet to come. Hecate creates plans that are specifically designed to force Macbeth to fulfill the prophecies foretold to him, taking on the commonly male-gendered role of the action-driver in the play. She says,

I am for the'air. This night I'll spend

Unto a dismal and a fatal end.

Great business must be wrought ere noon.

Upon the corner of the moon

There hangs a vap'rous drop profound;

I'll catch it ere it come to ground.

And that, distilled by magic sleights,

Shall raise such artificial sprites

As by the strength of their illusion

Shall draw him on to his confusion.

He shall spurn fate, scorn death, and bear

His hopes 'bove wisdom, grace and fear. (3.5.20-31)

This speech is full of allusions to ambiguity: where things come from, where they end, where they exist are all shrouded in the vagueness I alluded to earlier. The mention of air and vapor and illusion add anxiousness to Hecate's intentions and shrouds the means by which she will achieve the goals she sets out for herself in mystery. When she iterates that she will spend this night ruminating on "a dismal and fatal end," Hecate admits her plans to seal Macbeth's fate. As the understanding of Hecate as the goddess of witches came to the forefront of the cultural imagination, Hecate's space as the ultimate derivative force of power for witches—and for women caught in these spaces of liminality more generally—shifted her characterization into one of malice, which was not always necessarily her place in the pantheon of gods (Leeming 174). Hecate's assertion that she will catch whatever "magic sleights" the moon puts forth is a representation of her evil in most of her early modern

portrayals. The "artificial sprites" that she is raising are assumedly coming from hell, since they are being brought *up* rather than *down*. The latter portion of these lines refers to the entrapment set for Macbeth, where in a couple of scenes he will be thrust into the ghostly space between reality and prophecy. And Hecate, an important goddess that often stood as a guardian of liminal spaces and beings, is the ringleader.

The early modern perception of Hecate as a goddess of predominantly female concerns—and predominantly of women who are journeying from one patriarchal category to the next—is no longer present in the cultural consciousness, making the divergence of my reading from popular constructions of Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters as nothing more than terrifying witches all the more critical. Hecate's power in this play solidifies my readings of the Weird Sisters and Lady Macbeth in that we are shown the deity that helps conceptualize the sources of female power. The Weird Sisters' ambiguous gender and personhood can be directly related back to Hecate's guidance over restless and journeying souls who are caught between their human state and their after-lives, and Lady Macbeth's position as witch and not-witch, mother and not-mother can be seen as a space with which Hecate would have particularly concerned herself. The Weird Sisters and Lady Macbeth are extensions of the power that Hecate imparts, and without knowledge of Hecate's rule over these liminal spaces, such a reading is lost. Paying attention to Hecate's early modern cultural construction opens the doorway to many other images of liminality and ambiguity in this drama.

Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters are members of this liminal cult; they are powerful because they can take up their threatening roles as women or mothers but also lay those roles

down. Their power can also be derived from their ability to subsume more traditionally male-gendered roles, even though they are not any of them men or the patriarchally sanctioned rulers of their homes or powers. Their ambiguity allows them to be women and also not-women. As I will discuss, it is not that they become *men* or *manly* but that they, in their womanhood, are able to take up those male-gendered roles anyway. As the presence of Hecate encourages us to see, characters, scenes, and other aspects of the text in this tragedy lend themselves to multiple states of being.

Ambiguous identities are present throughout *Macbeth*: Banquo is dead but also alive—in ghostly form; Birnam Wood should not be able to move but does—when the opposing army to Macbeth attacks; and Macduff is both born of woman but also not—for he was untraditionally born of a C-section. All of these textual elements represent persons (and things, in the case of the Wood) in ambiguous states, wielding great power. In my focus on the female identities from this text that lie within ambiguous spaces, I will first shift my attention to the Weird Sisters, who exist on a terrain outside of humanity that also intersects with the plain of humans; they bear physical signs of both manhood and womanhood and ultimately demonstrate that power can be held in the identities between distinct categories.

The most overt representations of witches in *Macbeth* are the Weird Sisters, especially due to their mysterious ability to appear and disappear and their variant states of womanhood and manhood. These three prophesiers exist on the edge of material reality and magical obscurity: they often vanish into thin air after fortune-telling for Macbeth. Their ability to obscure themselves while also offering information of great portent places them in a position

of power over Macbeth and Banquo, making their identities as creatures that are obscure in personhood and gender a source of power. Banquo notes,

> What are these,
> So withered 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 choppy finger laying
> Upon her skinny lips. You should be women,
> And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
> That you are so. (1.3.40-48)

Banquo asks whether or not these beings are alive, wondering what realm they may come from and noting their bony and fading physique, as if they are in a constant state of death and decay. Moreover, the Weird Sisters' witchly existence connects to early modern conceptions of identities that allow women to gain power, a threatening move in a patriarchal system that is so weary of female power.

Even more disillusioning to Banquo and Macbeth is the liminality of the Weird Sisters' gender, which makes their wariness of the prophesiers come to the fore. He is concerned that they "should be women" and yet have facial hair. One of the most apparent identifiers of the Weird Sisters' ambiguous personhood is their beardedness. As Brett D. Hirsch explains, beards and deformities were popular in representations of witches on the early modern English stage. Beyond the fact that English acting companies at this point in history were

always comprised of men only, these outward signs of gender subversion or disability were meant to showcase how "the body of the witch was supposed to be physically deformed, as an outward manifestation of inward, moral aberration, or [of having been] branded by the Devil" (95). Mark Albert Johnston notes that male beardedness or beard-lessness signaled to the onlookers that a man had either completed his apprenticeship and was therefore economically and sexually viable to fulfill the act of marriage or that he had not yet completed such a milestone and was unable to be free of his master or be free to marry (1-2). A nuanced discussion of the ways that female beardedness came to be seen as patriarchal subversiveness and, therefore, in need of "ideological" modification in the cultural consciousness springs forth from here (2). In other words, a woman's beardedness needed somehow to be reconstructed so that it did not threaten the patriarchal signaling structures that had been put in place. Banquo, however, does not reconstruct the beardedness of the Weird Sisters in a way that allows us to read their beards as "natural wonders" (Johnston 2). No—instead, Banquo very clearly reads their bearded faces—and, in turn, forces his audience to read them—as a cultural impossibility, a subversive and threatening representation of these should-be women's otherworldly abilities, saying that their beards "forbid" him from seeing them as women (1.3.47). Based on the cultural understanding gleaned from the work of Hirsch and Johnston, the bearded nature of the Weird Sisters that Banquo notes could be seen as nothing more than a normal, early modern English indication that these figures are indeed witches. However, I argue that their bearded outward appearances, coupled with Banquo's questions about their non-human personhood, still

leaves room for a reading of the Weird Sisters as inhabiting an in-between and, therefore, threatening space.

As I discussed in my introduction, the Weird Sisters' monstrous identity is best explained through Cohen's theses of Monster Culture. These witches have been culturally constructed as both male and female at the same time, a possibility that Banquo cannot accept within his cultural context—these ideas stem from contextualizing *Macbeth* with Cohen's theory (4; 6). The queerness of the Weird Sisters' appearance troubles the noblemen. Willis writes that "in Shakespeare's plays witchcraft is clearly intertwined with...gender transgression," meaning that the beardedness of the Weird Sisters is not merely a representation of cultural thoughts about bearded women but extends throughout Shakespeare's works as a particular commentary on witches' abilities to subvert men and patriarchy (6). Physical mirroring of the male visage can be interpreted as a usurpation of male-gendered societal roles. This gender transgression can be seen not only in the outward appearances of the Weird Sisters but also in their ornate plans to lead Macbeth to ultimate destruction, manipulating his movements for seemingly no other end but to entertain themselves. That these magical beings should take on the physical form of both man and woman places them explicitly in a place to claim the power of both man and woman, even if they certainly are not men.

The gender ambiguity that the Weird Sisters display connects with cultural ideas about witches as gender destructive. Stephanie Chamberlain writes, "As does the maternal, witchcraft represents an ambiguous gender status" (80). This means that the powerful nature of witches in the culture, coupled with the presentation of the witches in this play and others

like it as expressly female, immediately disrupts and threatens patriarchal values of a male-centered and -controlled society. Yet witches were also culturally coded as gender subversive, so manly traits on a female body became indicative, as Hirsch explains, of some kind of moral issue within the soul (2). The Weird Sisters physically represent the ability of witches and women to take on bodily states that subvert the patriarchal signaling system—the beard—created by and only for men, and they—along with their master Hecate—direct the action of the play by continuously supplying Macbeth with prophecies that guide his decisions.

The last time Macbeth interacts with the Weird Sisters and the other members of their coven is when they conjure the apparitions that ultimately detail Macbeth's downfall, and in this moment, they proclaim their hand in his undoing. By this point in the play, the witches' prophecies have tantalized Macbeth to begin down a path from which he now cannot falter. The witches chant for the spirits to "Show his eyes, and grieve his heart: Come like shadows, so depart" (4.1.109-110). These "shadows" exist, too, on a line between real and imaginary, so the Weird Sisters' ultimate power as liminal figures is not only encompassed by their outward representations of subversion but is also manifested in the images they can create. Macbeth is panicked by the scene that unfolds, definitive evidence being shown to him—according to his experience—of Banquo's ultimate revenge against him by asserting his own line, even though Macbeth is king: "Now, I see 'tis true, / For the blood-boltered Banquo smiles upon me, / And points at them for his" (4.1.121-123). We could read this line multiple ways, the most conspicuous analysis being that Banquo's metaphorical finger point is towards his dynastic line. However, it is also possible to read the ambiguous pronoun

"them" as the witches who have hitherto been understood only as prophesying bystanders to the action; in this moment, Macbeth might see Banquo pointing towards the Weird Sisters and their coven as the masterminds of his demise. Though they stand on the outskirts of reality, they challenge the patriarchal and patrilineal understanding of kingship, and their manipulations have changed the course of history.

Threats to male power and control were at the forefront of cultural fears in early modern England. Though witches were thought to be the epitome of this threat, the witch figure extended into the domestic realm and affected cultural thoughts on wives and mothers, each female figure eventually feeding one into the next to create a network of fear that surrounded the female presence almost constantly. Willis writes that the witch figure, though rarely foregrounded in texts the way it is in *Macbeth* and *The Witch*, was often an amalgamation of "...the village witch, the pamphlet witch, the witch of religious tracts, but also...the fairy-tale witch, the witch of ballads, medieval romance, continental demonological texts, the Bible, and the Greek and Roman classics" (160). She even writes that Hecate and other witches of mythological lineage possibly influenced the representation of witches on the early modern stage more than the real women being tried for the crime of witchcraft (160). Staged witches were emphasized versions of the very real threat that the patriarchal elite felt coming from the domestic woman. Patriarchally sanctioned personhood categories, such as virgin, mother, and widow, were ways of keeping these women under patriarchal control; a standing outside of any of these roles was viewed as subversive. In this way, the Weird Sisters are not the only female figures in the play caught between one patriarchally defined boundary for the woman in society and the next. Lady Macbeth also showcases the

ways that women came to be feared. Her words and not her actions are what define her as witch and mother, but because her actions often do not align with these identity constructions, she is caught in the liminal space between these formidable boundaries.

Lady Macbeth's soliloquies are some of the most revealing passages in *Macbeth*, especially as it pertains to the gender ambiguity and subversion that I have thus far been discussing. Scholars have confronted the famous unsexing soliloquy in various ways, among those being Arthur Bradley's assertion that "...[Lady Macbeth's] soliloquies famously explore the relation between cause and effect, deed and consequence, anticipation and retrospection, as well as the (variously chronological, kairological, or eschatological) constellation between past, present, and future times" (73). The "past, present, and future" to which Bradley refers may be applied to the question of the Macbeths' children—Lady Macbeth's past in having "given suck" (1.7.54), her present in rejecting such maternal roles, and what these two things mean for the future of the Macbeth line. To reiterate Chamberlain's point and add my own emphasis, maternal power feeds on the gender ambiguity that arises from the conflict of what should be the submissive female experience (80). And though Lady Macbeth is not a mother in this play, amongst other levels of her ambiguous nature, her discussion of such a topic aligns her with mothers. The gender ambiguity represented by her unsexing soliloquy is extended into her linguistic pattern just as it is physically represented by the Weird Sisters, but her call to be unsexed is not representative of a desire to be more manly but is a refusal to be associated with any gender. Lady Macbeth conjures spirits of some other realm in this famous proclamation:

Come, you spirits

That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,

And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full

Of direst cruelty! (1.5.38-41)

Diane Purkiss writes that it is around this moment that the "theatrical superstition" of *Macbeth* revolves—because of something Lady Macbeth has said, "not Macbeth, not the Weird Sisters." In her view, Lady Macbeth "delivers the only authentic invocation to the powers of darkness in this play" ("Witchcraft in Early Modern Literature" 131). This places her squarely in the realm of witch and at the center of a play that has been named for her husband. Yet no spirits ever come to her, as far as the action of the play text shows, so it is difficult to ascribe the moniker "witch" to Lady Macbeth when we are seeing no signs of her interacting with spirits herself.

Many scholars also focus on Lady Macbeth's desire to be unsexed and read it as a longing to become more manly. As Catherine Thomas explains, much of the early modern anxiety about Lady Macbeth was attached to the "effective rhetorical manipulation of her husband to 'be a man' and take action" (81). On the other hand, Chamberlain ultimately argues that the unsexing of Lady Macbeth is not about her desire to take on a more masculine role but, instead, should be linked with her shirking off of male and female gender roles entirely, for throughout the play, Lady Macbeth actively rejects outward shows of masculine power (79-80). I would like to add to Chamberlain's argument my own discussion of liminality as a state of power for the women in this play. Lady Macbeth's refusal of her wifely and motherly potential does not necessarily mean, as I explained earlier, that she is immediately moving to the realm of becoming husbandly or fatherly or manly. Instead, her

insistence on opposing the linguistically defined categories that often prompt violence against women—such as the category of "crone" or "witch" and the persecution and punishment that follows these labels—is a claim of the ambiguous identity between witch and not-witch, woman and not-woman, man and not-man. She cannot be categorized sufficiently as a witch for lack of evidence of interacting with spirits and other witches, yet she problematizes her own standing as not-witch by calling on demonic spirits. Her existence in that in-between space forces us to see her as a witch but also challenges her very identity as such. A woman who could not be categorized in any pre-existing, patriarchally defined category of female importance and relevance in society automatically brings about feelings of anxiety and panic in the early modern consciousness.

Lady Macbeth also refuses the category of "mother," even though she is often staged as a woman of child-bearing age. The problem of maternal power, as Adelman writes, is at the forefront of concerns in *Macbeth*. To echo a quote from the last chapter, "...the whole of the play represents in very powerful form both the fantasy of a virtually absolute and destructive maternal power and the fantasy of absolute escape from this power" (33). Adelman's assertion that this play grapples expressly with "absolute and destructive maternal power" shines new light on Lady Macbeth's rejection of motherhood. I see it now not as a stripping away of her maternal power but as a transformation of these powers into something sinister. Further on in the same passage I was just dealing with, Lady Macbeth asks these spirits,

> Come to my woman's breasts
>
> And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers,...
>
> That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,

Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark

To cry, "hold, hold!" (1.5.45-46, 50-52)

Here, Lady Macbeth further disassociates herself from the commonly understood female duty of motherhood and asks for the nurturing milk of her mothering breasts to be replaced with "gall," a term that is coded in modern linguistics as a bravado normally afforded to masculine characters. Early modern playgoers would have understood the term "gall" as "yellow bile." Eileen Sperry writes, "Whereas breastmilk has already been established in [Lady Macbeth's] rhetoric as indicative of political inaction, gall, or yellow bile, would have represented….a predisposition to violent or impulsive action…" (38). Lady Macbeth could have simply called for her breast milk to be dried up. But replacing breast milk, which is understood as a by-product of motherly nurture and care, with gall, coded as evil, strips Lady Macbeth of the implicit emotions readers and playgoers might ascribe to mother figures but does not strip her of maternal power—for she can still be suckled, even if the child is a demonic familiar. David Goldstein also meditates on the "liquidity" in *Macbeth*, even the bodily fluids present in this soliloquy: "It is a play that fundamentally concerns and enacts a problematic of liquidity, in which an obsessive catalog of fluids—water, milk, wine, poison, blood—pools into an understanding of human nature at once permeable and transformative" (165). The taking out of fluids and the replacing of those fluids with poisonous or noxious ones suggests not that Lady Macbeth is totally eliminating her ability to mother but is, instead, manipulating it into malevolence. The very words that deny her mothering capabilities also seek to transform these bodily fluids and functions, molding her into a figure that has no human emotion—guilt amongst them—at all, creating a personhood that currently portrays

human emotion but is also pushing back against those emotions, desiring existence in a space where those emotions either do not exist or are not necessary.

These utterances connect to liminality as easily as maternity connects to witchcraft in early modern English thought. Lady Macbeth's mission is always to make her husband king, to which she would take the subordinate role as queen. However, like the Weird Sisters and their coven members, she is also a driver of action in this play, designing the plot that will end in Duncan's murder; making excuses for and speaking in place of her husband when, in shock of seeing Banquo's ghost, he cannot speak for himself; and even aligning her linguistic pattern and material plans with that of the Weird Sisters' prophecies. Ultimately, Lady Macbeth becomes unable to disguise the evil that she has enacted, and this same evil drives her mad. But before exploring this madness and the potential connections this madness has with ideas about consequences for women who do not fulfill their maternal or domestic roles—at least in early modern English thought—I would like to look into some other passages in which Lady Macbeth linguistically codes herself as a mother and a witch yet never performs, within the confines of the play, the actions to which she refers.

When convincing Macbeth to kill Duncan, Lady Macbeth threatens that he is not truly the man of the house—or of their relationship—if he does not bring about the King's death. She says, "When you durst do it, then you were a man; / And to be more than what you were, you would / Be so much more the man" (1.7.49-51). By this, she means that, having committed the murder, he would have fulfilled the performance of manhood by taking what the Weird Sisters had prophesied would be his. But if he does not murder the King, he is less than a man, for he cannot bring himself to commit the act necessary to bring his accession to

the throne to fruition. She then takes this linguistic assault on her husband to the next level by asserting herself as manly enough to commit the crime while also motioning towards her womanly capabilities to be a mother:

> I have given suck and know
> How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me;
> I would, while it was smiling in my face,
> Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
> And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you
> Have done to this. (1.7.54-57)

Chamberlain notes the "striking" images of this scene: "[We] have the loving image of a nurturing mother….[that] immediately gives way…, as a demonic mother butchers her yet-smiling infant" (82). Lady Macbeth concurrently suggests that she was a mother and, knowing the desires and emotions of a mother, she would still have no difficulty slaughtering her child if the situation—or her word—demanded it. And she has also explicitly undermines Macbeth's manliness by asserting that she is capable of one of the most heinous crimes in early modern culture, infanticide, which was another space in early modern culture that was interestingly configured as a threshold. There had yet to be a definitive answer for when a newborn became fully human in early modern England. Josephine Billingham writes that infanticide was a thin line, seeing as a case could be made that the newborn just killed was not yet human. Furthermore, Billingham relates that the state of pregnancy was always liminal—almost mother but not quite yet (77). It is no surprise that Lady Macbeth discusses at length such liminal states of being and ponders the murder of a newborn. Lady Macbeth

assumes the roles of mother, witch, woman, and man without hardly a breath in this scene. The ambiguity of her status as all but also not really any of these personas furthers the fear of her as a character that lends herself to ambiguity. The more ambiguous she is, the harder she is to control. The harder she is to control, the more threat she poses to her husband, patrilineal succession, and patriarchy in general.

Lady Macbeth offends her husband's manliness in yet another scene later in the play, in which the ghost of Banquo comes to haunt Macbeth. When the noblemen note Macbeth's psychological terror, they remark that they should help him, to which Lady Macbeth begins to speak in place of her husband: "Sit, worthy friends. My lord is often thus…" (3.4.54). She has not only begun to speak for her husband, something a wife would have been thought never to do as her husband's subordinate, but she is also actively manipulating the guests at this feast. Furthermore, she turns to her suffering husband and asks, "Are you a man?" (3.4.59). She continues,

> Oh, these flaws and starts,
> Imposters to true fear, would well become
> A woman's story at a winter's fire,
> Authorized by her grandam. Shame itself! (3.4.64-67)

Though I have thus far been noting in this scene the way Lady Macbeth insults her husband by aligning him with feminine traits, I would also like to recognize the way that Lady Macbeth distances herself from these same feminine traits, further obscuring her identity as woman. She explicitly ridicules women for their easily frightened minds and also indicates that her husband's silly visions would shock only grandmothers. She speaks as if she is not a

woman herself. It is clear that she not only intends to deride her husband's fortitude but also plans to set herself apart from the normally feminized, easily terrorized nerve. By distancing herself from other women in this culture, she subverts patriarchal ideas of female categories and simultaneously refuses to uphold these categories as a complacent agent of patriarchy. Though she is a sinister character not only for the physical harm to others she threatens to exact and for her subversion of patriarchal social standards, she is also actively taking on somewhat of a feminist role in that she denies the absoluteness of boundaries based on gender, ability to conceive, marriage, and so forth.

Eventually, all of Lady Macbeth's strength crumbles when she is caught sleepwalking, in a state of madness, which in many ways undermines the readings some scholars have set forth about her strength and aggressiveness. To return to Levin's analysis, such states of madness as exhibited particularly by women were transfigured in the cultural consciousness from directly linking to demonic possession to, instead, connecting with a disease known as the "Mother" (22). According to Levin, "The satanic force animating both the bewitched and witches alike could thereafter be relocated within the female body." "The mother," another word for the womb, is an illness that can only exist within the bodies of women (22). Lady Macbeth's associations with demonic spirits earlier on in the play allow us to take two directions of consideration: ramifications of dealing with the Devil and the fragility of the feminine mind. While sleepwalking may not always be indicative of madness, the reaction of the Doctor and the Gentlewoman suggests that this is how they have viewed her plight, as evidence of madness. The state in which her episode takes place is also peculiar in that she is unconscious for its duration—she is asleep but also not-asleep.

My discussion of liminality continues, as the fear Lady Macbeth incites in the Doctor and the Gentlewoman allows for further argument about power in ambiguous states. Sasha Handley notes that early modern English perceptions of sleep intersected across three boundaries: "falling asleep, being asleep, and waking up" (4). Once more, there is a connection between a tri-categorization of being—reminiscent of Hecate—that is interrupted. Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene, as Handley's work suggests, violates early modern conceptions of good sleep and would speak, to some degree, to Lady Macbeth's moral standing, as quality of sleep was often seen as related to a person's "fortune" after the practice of sleep became the permanence of death (2). Cultural perceptions of rest placed heavy weight on sleep quality, so Lady Macbeth's performance of being asleep and not asleep would have immediately sparked unease for early modern playgoers who viewed such disruptive sleep patterns as indicative of immorality (2-3). Handley indicates that sleep practices were holy and sanctified rites of the Christian religions of the time—Lady Macbeth's unrest appears as a stark contrast to the Protestant and even Catholic spiritual sleep practices of the time (11).

The bewilderment of the Doctor and the Gentlewoman at Lady Macbeth's ability to be both asleep yet seemingly awake solidifies Lady Macbeth as a character who is threatening and terrifying, unable to control herself yet in control of everyone else simultaneously. The Doctor deems her sleepwalking as a by-product of inhuman(e) actions: "Unnatural deeds / Do breed unnatural troubles" (5.1.64-65). Not only does he comment on her current state, the guilt-ridden sleepwalker, but he also refers back to the non-human, emotionless state in which she has conducted herself throughout the entire play. Dympna

Callaghan notes that Lady Macbeth is finally "...unable to relinquish her maternality," meaning that though she repeatedly attempts to shirk off such responsibilities, the constructs of the play do not allow her to do so (363). This final scene of Lady Macbeth's unrest is evident of the culmination of her sins throughout the play, and she is tamed, brought back to what Callaghan writes is a "...feminine remorse, guilt, and madness…" (363). Though I agree with Callaghan's assessment that the maternal power—and the witches and witchcraft associated with this power, and vice versa—are demystified by the end of the play (365), concluding that Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking scene is final confirmation of even a "fiend-like Queen['s]" inability to escape her own femininity (368), we cannot discount the detail that Lady Macbeth's final scene on stage is evidence of a continuation of mystical influence, of liminality, of questions unanswerable. She becomes both human and not human in a way that other moments of the play have before referred to, such as when she conjures spirits or aligns herself with the Weird Sisters. Instead of becoming an ambiguously gendered figure, Lady Macbeth becomes an ambiguously human figure, dangling between consciousness and unconsciousness in an uncomfortable way.

Ultimately, we are told by a servant—intriguingly named "Seyton," a name which carries with it conspicuous ideas about the Devil's hand in the action of this play because it likely would have been pronounced "SA-ton"—that Lady Macbeth is dead (5.5.16). I insist that Lady Macbeth's off-stage death is yet another place in which playgoers' understanding of her personhood is further obscured. That we do not witness her death is no mistake; she now forever lives in a Schroedinger's cat-like state between both dead and alive, for exclusively hearing of her death second-hand after just seeing her alive, being offered no

further explanation for her quick and apparent death, being barred from witnessing her death first-hand, only allows audiences to remember her lastly in that sleepwalking state that is somewhere between awake and asleep, now permanently seen as somewhere between dead and alive.

The witch figure continues to live on in the social consciousness, even when the Weird Sisters disappear and Lady Macbeth is proclaimed dead. Cohen's second tenet of monster culture theory is that the monster always comes back, no matter how many times it is killed (38-39). The witch figure, being viewed as monstrous, comes forward again and again, even when she has been beaten down before. We will see a reemergence of this figure in Thomas Middleton's *The Witch* in my next chapter, where I will continue considerations of liminal identities as threatening to the social order.

My discussion of liminality up to this point has included ideas about ambiguous identities and personhoods throughout Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The terror that Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters often incite could potentially be due to the fact that they are socially accepted as witches, but the play never explicitly uses that appellation to describe them. Their ambiguous identities, such as their state as not-women—meaning that they are physically female but deny the patriarchally defined ideas of what the female body can produce for society, such as a clean home for the husband and children who will hopefully propagate the patriarchal standards of the time—creates a threatening and powerful personhood. But the threat is alleviated when Lady Macbeth dies and the Weird Sisters disappear, never to come back. These persons existing between socially sanctioned categories have the ability to linguistically or physically situate themselves in-between labels

that society recognizes as purposeful and important. Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters' existence outside of these social divisions pose immediate threats to patriarchal hierarchies of personhood because they do not adhere to the social rules of obedience. This discussion of liminality will continue in my reading of *The Witch*, where Hecate makes another appearance as an overseer of women in the play, leading to thoughts on her identity as a goddess that represents the journey from one state of being to another.

Chapter 3: Correcting the Subversive:
Ensuring the Survival of the Patriarchal Order in
Thomas Middleton's *The Witch*

Though Shakespeare's *Macbeth* provides a portrait of what early modern people believed witches were capable of, Thomas Middleton's *The Witch* (~1616) gives readers a look into a more satirical point of view. This play contains numerous plotlines that hardly seem to affect or determine one another, instead winding about each other and coming into contact in unexpected and seemingly accidental ways. The play begins with what we later learn is Sebastian's reemergence—Isabella, his betrothed, believes him to be dead. She has married another, Antonio. Throughout the play, Sebastian's goal is to ruin Isabella's marriage with Antonio so that he may win back his bride. In the meantime, Francisca, Antonio's sister, attempts to hide an illegitimate pregnancy, and another female character, simply called the Duchess, plots to murder her cruel husband, the Duke. Almost entirely separate from all of these machinations is a plot including a witch named Hecate, who, in addition to being in an incestuous relationship with her son Firestone—who is not very fond of his mother or her other coven members—is also a pretty terrible witch, never really being able to produce the *maleficium* she and the other members of the play call for her to perform. There is little in the plotline of the drama that connects the witchcraft plot with Hecate to that of the aristocrats.

The aristocratic members of the play—such as Isabella, Francisca, and the Duchess—seem to exist in an almost wholly different world from Hecate, Firestone, and the rest of their coven members. Francisca spends a majority of the play navigating the halls of

her abode and the tricky situation of being an unwed pregnant woman. Isabella is caught in the crosshairs between her betrothed and her husband. And the Duchess is hell-bent on murdering her husband with the help of Almachildes, a servant; this plot then transitions into one where the Duchess calls on the witch Hecate for help in killing Almachildes—one of the few scenes in which the aristocratic and witch plot lines intersect. There is no satisfactory ending; how can there be when the plot lines of the play seem trivial, pointless, and without effect on one another? No one truly gets what they desire, for the characters do not productively work towards their goals. Yet *The Witch* still provides insights about the fear of female power in early modern England, even if the stage representation of these women is meant to be comical rather than menacing. Though her presence on the stage is meant to be satirical Hecate's appearance in this play, as it does in *Macbeth*, opens a forum for discussion of liminal identities as having a power-holding existence.

I argue that, though Middleton's Hecate does little (some scholars, such as Jeanne Addison Roberts, whom I will discuss later, would go so far as to say *nothing*) to affect the rest of the actions in this play, the harkening back of her name to the Hecate of mythology brings forth questions and ideas about her standing as a figure of three-fold existence. Since all of the women in the play exist outside of traditional social categories, as I will show, they are connected with the mythological Hecate figure in her trinitarian construction, always returning to ideas about the goddess's standing as one of multitudes. The aristocratic women exist in spaces in-between, never quite fulfilling their proper societal roles, somehow reaching out into the ambiguity that early modern people were threatened by and, therefore, feared. Such subversive states of being force readers to consider patriarchal understandings

of the female position and condition and also help us to see the ways that such ambiguous identities wield power and pose threats to patriarchal society. In *The Witch*, all potential threats to patriarchal order are somehow corrected or nullified, further providing evidence of how feared ambiguous identities can hold power strong enough to warrant attention.

This play is often taken as satiric due to the overly dramatized and ridiculous plotlines and personas in this play—of what, though, it is meant to be satirical is left up to interpretation (Keller 56). Middleton may be satirizing the belief in witchcraft as a whole, supported by the usage of Scot's text in this play, for Scot was also skeptical of witchly power (and existence). Scot's skepticism is perceivable seeping into Middleton's play, shown in the way that Hecate's magic often fails her. Furthermore, as I will mention later, Hecate is often seen spell casting, but the result of the spells she casts are never brought back into the plot, leaving it ambiguous whether or not her spells take. This play may also be satirizing female power more generally, for the play often forces these women who have pushed or broken the traditional social boundaries back into their proper patriarchal categories. Almost every powerful female figure is brought back under the control of a male. The context of satire, particularly of female power, creates difficulty in analysis, for no matter what parallels we see between the women in this play and the goddess Hecate, we must remember the comical situation that Middleton has forced upon his characters. I will continue with my analysis of threatening female power, nevertheless, supported by other scholars who have also seen traces of such female power being considered in *The Witch*.

There is not much scholarship on Thomas Middleton's *The Witch,* and the play is rarely studied by itself—separate from others of Middleton's plays or from the looming giant that is

Shakespeare's *Macbeth*—except for when it is being introduced in an edition, such as Marion O'Connor's contribution, which I will discuss in a moment. Some scholars of early modern witchcraft, including Deborah Willis, reference *The Witch* only in a supporting role to further the conversation about witchcraft in the culture—or, for Willis, to further the conversation about Shakespeare (27). As long ago as1956, scholars such as Samuel Schoenbaum discussed the lack of scholarship on Middleton's plays (7), but such calls to action have been vastly ignored. Schoenbaum's own work even pairs *The Witch* with others of Middleton's lesser-studied plays. I do not mean to discount the work that Schoenbaum did on *The Witch*; he particularly looks to unpack the ways Middleton might have been influenced by other contemporary playwrights dabbling in tragicomedy or stories with cultural impact that were circulating in the mainstream (10). Yet his essay is not concerned with analyzing this drama and treating it as a play that can stand on its own in an interpretative essay. However, when introduced as part of a collection, *The Witch* is given its proper due and care, special attention being paid to its history and possible source material.

One of the most infamous interpretations of the play is that it references the court case of Frances Howard. Marion O'Connor lends important context to this play in her explication of the similarities between Middleton's tragicomedy and this court case, which proved an influential cultural moment. According to O'Connor, the witch trope in this play was influenced by Frances Howard—who, with the help of her second husband, Robert Carr, reportedly murdered Sir Thomas Overbury by means of poisoning. Due to the annulment of her marriage from her first husband, Robert Devereux, Howard was continually cast in the cultural consciousness as a whore even though the searchers at her trial (midwives and

matrons from the community charged with performing a bodily examination) confirmed she was a virgin at the time of the dissolution of her marriage to Devereux. Apparently, according to contemporaneous gossip, Howard consulted with a wise woman to ensure that she would pass such an examination (1124). This will all sound familiar to those who have a general understanding of the plot of *The Witch*: Sebastian, Isabella's previously believed-to-be dead betrothed, is able to claim Isabella even after she is married to another. He can do this because he has ensured her purity remains intact by consulting with Hecate, who causes Antonio, Isabella's husband, to become impotent (1125).

O'Connor also explains further connections between the plot of *The Witch* and popular myths that Middleton likely consulted and rehashed for his own tragicomedy, paying particular attention to how Hecate's ancient mythology comes into play in Middleton's work (1125). I, too, have paid close attention to the looming nature of Hecate's cultural backgrounds and how these understandings of this almighty witch goddess illuminate the constantly shifting and liminal positions of the female characters in this play. The consideration of Hecate's tri-configuration shapes the way this play unfolds and provides answers to the mysterious meanings behind this play, a play that has remained obscure both in stage productions of early modern English dramas and also within the scholarly discussion.

As I have mentioned, most scholars do not consider *The Witch* without pairing it with at least one other play, but exceptions are James Keller and Paul Yachnin. Keller's "Witchcraft and the Domestic Female Hero" hinges on a historical understanding of witches as the epitome of women seizing power in the face of a patriarchal society. Keller comments,

"The seventeenth-century witch had three particularly threatening characteristics. She was associated with sexual promiscuity, with the rejection of domestic and maternal obligation, and with aggressiveness uncharacteristic of contemporary women" (39). Not only do Keller's historical views of early modern witches align with the women from the aristocratic plotline in ways that he continues to show, but his three-fold conception of the early modern witch also neatly coordinates with my reading of the trinitarian Hecate as the lens through which we must read these characters. Furthermore, Keller argues that Middleton's fanciful portrayal of the witches encodes a serious political commentary on the disreputable women in society who refuse to complete their patriarchal duties (42). This discussion places the play in the topical cultural context of changing female roles in society. Keller argues against what many scholars view as a prescriptive understanding of witches gleaned from Reginald Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* and, instead, asserts that "...the witches have a direct relevance to the issue of gender roles in the drama" (42). Francisca and Isabella become foils for one another in his argument, wherein they represent the opposite ends of early modern spectrums of understanding in regards to proper female sexual conduct. In the reading that I will pursue, Francisca and Isabella are more than sexual characters, actually existing on the same kind of continuum, both being viewed as potential threats to male power.

The reading of *The Witch* as a drama about social constructs and categories that Keller provides differs slightly from Paul Yachnin's, which is an argument more concerned with the early modern stage as a potential money-making project. Yachnin's discussion of *The Witch* in "Scandalous Trades" is far more politicized, aiming to understand the ways that culturally impactful court cases, such as that of Frances Howard (218), whose case I have already

briefly discussed. Yachnin's essay can be generally summed up by the following sentence: "*The Witch*'s involvement in the populuxe entertainment business rather than Middleton's supposed political allegiance is the primary basis of the play's critique of courtly consumption and aristocratic sexual license" (231). The term "populuxe entertainment business" can be defined within the context of this essay as the money-earning early modern stage, wherein the playwright is not a scathing social commentator but instead is a piece in the "nascent entertainment market" of seventeenth-century England (218). Yachnin does not claim that Middleton had no political agenda, arguing that the play is deliberate satire on current political practices and culturally significant court cases despite any political ties—which may explain, as many scholars that Yachnin mentions have argued, why *The Witch* was banned (218). But Yachnin's assertion that the point of penning this play may not have been politically driven helps me make space for my sincere argument about early modern fear of female power. However, Yachnin's take still differs from my reading, as I have not considered the political ramifications Middleton may have faced by basing these characters and plot lines on popular court cases and folk tales at the time. Rather, for me, Middleton's play makes thought-provoking commentary on early modern fears about witchcraft and its connection to female power, which is veiled by the necessary factor of entertaining action and comedy for a money-earning theatre. I am more deeply interested in the cultural influences that inform *The Witch*, such as social conceptions of witches, witchcraft, and the connection of witches with patriarchally subversive women in places of power.

Some scholars have picked up on the themes of female social categories in *The Witch* and use these moments to expand understandings of the way early modern witchcraft trials, including those in England, which were generally held to be less lurid than those in Europe, focused particularly on bodily signs of witchcraft. Witches were often discussed in incredibly sexual terms during the early modern period. They were thought to go above and beyond the societal expectation of female sexuality, but they were also connected with interfering in other women's lives and sexual lives in particular, such as intercourse, child-rearing, and patrilineal succession. In her explanation of English witchcraft trials and the sexualized aspects of evidence gathering, Julia Garrett lists Thomas Middleton as one of the many early modern English playwrights who used these prurient real-life trials as fodder to fuel his dramas (36-7). Jeanne Addison Roberts provides insight into the other end of the spectrum, the state of "crone" that a woman takes on as she becomes older, widowed, and/or no longer capable of bearing children. On *The Witch*, Roberts argues in opposition to Keller—who, to recall, claims that the witches in this play are integral to conversations about female power in the period—asserting that Hecate's spells are more "...playful than frightening." According to Roberts' reading, it is not just that the spells are playful but that these crones have passed their viable window of doing harm—that is both literally, in respect to the characters in the play that they attempt to spell, and figuratively, in that such useless witches should not be seen as threats to the patriarchy (127).

The most popular move amongst scholars is to compare *Macbeth* and *The Witch*, for these plays have much in common, both textually and, as some scholars posit, because Thomas Middleton contributed to some scenes in *Macbeth*. Daniel Albright launches into a

consideration of the stage history of *Macbeth*, focusing his insights around the Weird Sisters and how Hecate connects these two plays together, culminating in a discussion about the varying musical aspects of these two dramas (143-4). Robert Lima deliberates on the general presentations of witches and witchcraft on both the Elizabethan and Jacobean stages, citing *The Witch* as providing "...a cornucopia of popular ideas on witchcraft and other superstitions, English and Continental…" (208). Ultimately, *The Witch* is often valued most in the ways it informs Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, such as in Celia Daileader's work, in which Middleton's pen is heavily accepted as present in Shakespeare's play. Daileader, working off of the knowledge that Middleton introduced the character of Hecate to *Macbeth*, uses information gleaned from *The Witch* to further understandings of the exoticized nature of the Hecate of *Macbeth*, to produce a racial argument. She writes that the witch scenes, including Hecate's from *Macbeth,* often "...call for...an 'exotic' setting and cast" (12). Background information on the traditional Hecate's conceptions, which predate the early modern stage and her emergence into the European and English cultural consciousness, will help us to see the ways that she was perceived in the culture of early modern England. Cultural knowledge of her as an almighty witch goddess was at play in Middleton's satire, and I mostly see his usage of her character as a way to undermine female power and authority.

Hecate, as Sarah Iles Johnston writes, is a goddess with a long, traditional history, and she begins her journey to the early modern stage in Asia Minor. From there, the goddess moves not only location—to Greece (205)—but also shifts in the mythic imagination (247). As she entered the Greek pantheon, Hecate became known as a goddess who could guard gates, entryways, and portals; as the guardian of this space, she also had the ability to allow

malevolent spirits into the place she was guarding to wreak havoc on those who were simply "unfortunate" enough to have been resigned to such a fate (209). The liminality of entryways held a lot of weight in not only Greek but also early modern English culture, and as such, Hecate became an important figure for the home and the women in charge of these homes. Firmly positioned, then, as a goddess of liminal spaces, as I have already noted, and also as a goddess who was expected to make appearances at major moments in the lives of young girls and women—their wedding days and the days they became mothers, for instance—she eventually became uniquely positioned against Artemis as a goddess who epitomized women who died before their earthly female roles of wife and mother could be totally completed (247). After some time, Hecate came to be known as the goddess in charge of restless souls—of any gender—who may have been thought to have been pulled from the earth before their time, constantly stuck in a place of liminality (248). Thus, the Hecate known to us as the goddess of the undead and of demons, a state which naturally lends itself to that of witchcraft, came to be.

Without any allusions to the mythological Hecate, Diane Purkiss makes an interesting point about the cultural and domestic responsibilities of the early modern housewife and the disruption witchcraft often caused to those responsibilities. She writes, "The housewife's role involves maintaining boundaries, boundaries between nature and culture, between inside and outside, pollution and purity." She goes on to write that a woman's awareness of the boundaries of her house was vastly important in assuring her family a pure home and a good life (*The Witch in History* 97-8). It is exceedingly clear how Hecate could have become seen

as a being that early modern women might turn to, as their place as the guardians of liminal spaces in the household is congruent with that of Hecate's command over these same spaces.

Middleton's Hecate is clearly and distinctly different from the mythical Hecate, who comes from Carian or Greek tradition and who was sometimes called upon by magicians and those practicing the dark arts (Sarah Johnston 204). Middleton's Hecate is not a goddess but merely another witch named for the mythological figure. Lima writes that Middleton's *The Witch* taps into the tradition of Hecate very little: "[Indeed], the witchcraft practices depicted throughout the play are Elizabethan or Continental in origin and have little relation to the majesty and supernatural activities associated with the classical Hecate" (208). While writing of Hecate's addition to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Albright argues, "Hecate...is a spirit of zigzag self-delight, with a short attention span…[Her] malice is so theoretical that she seems innocuous, cartoonish" (143). Her innocuity can similarly be seen in *The Witch*, for though she is often portrayed as a spellcaster, little is revealed about the potency of her *maleficium*. For example, the first scene in which we meet her shows some practice that is meant to ultimately deal massive harm or even death upon a farming couple who refused her pleas for help, but whatever disaster that amounted to for this couple is never shown or even referred back to throughout the play (1.2.33-66).[1] That we never return to this farming couple, even if Hecate's magic was potent enough to cause them severe harm, allows the audience to come to the conclusion that nothing really happened. There are many more instances in the play of unresolved magical spells that Hecate casts, but for her very first scene to hold a

[1] From here, all citations for *The Witch* have been extracted from the 1986 version of the play, found in *Three Jacobean Witchcraft Plays*.

representation of this lack of magical authority or maleficence is pivotal to our understanding of her as a less-than effective witch. Garrett agrees with Lima, marking Middleton's Hecate and her witch sisters as "comically repugnant," on the periphery of the action, and "provocative but ultimately not threatening" (46). Hecate and her coven members ostensibly pose no major threat, which brings us back to the popular scholarly claim that *The Witch* presents its witches only to the ends of satirizing figures of female power, working to undermine their power in the cultural consciousness.

Such an interpretation suggests that even Middleton's Hecate exists in an ambiguous position here as a woman known to be a witch, appearing to bear all of the essential emotions and wrath that most women accused of witchcraft bear in historical witch trials, but ultimately being harmless. She fails to harm the farming couple that I discussed earlier; I mention this again because I also find it telling that Hecate's desire to do harm to a married couple—and her ultimate failure to do so—comments on the underscore of the play, which is the finality of the patriarchy's persistence through threat. And furthermore, she fails to totally make Antonio impotent or kill Almachildes, the Duchess' partner in the plot to murder her husband. She may finally be surmised as another image of female failure, wherein she never totally fulfills the role of the category she has been patriarchally placed in.

Hecate's failure may be seen as congruent with changes in female power within early modern English culture, when, around this time period, men began to publish their own collections of herbals, texts that contained knowledge that was previously deemed as female and had hitherto been passed down through generations of women rather than through published books. The written herbal tradition shifted understandings of a previously female

domain as male and only further subverts any wise woman, healing woman, or domestic female herbal knowledge. Rebecca Laroche writes that the positioning of female herbal practices "is often represented as herbal abuse, that is, as ignorantly filled with errors, lasciviously focused on pleasure, or malevolently meant to cause harm" on the basis of these herbalist women being "uneducated, non-gentry women" (52). She argues that "representations of the witch in the herbal tradition expose anxieties about the ways in which the herbal text may contribute to unregulated—and dangerous—herbal practice" (43). This supposedly unmediated herbal practice amongst women led to fears around female chains of knowledge and female community. Laroche's scholarship is incredibly important within the context of Middleton's play, for it helps readers to understand a possible reason why herbs make persistent appearances throughout the drama as a means by which Hecate enacts her spells. Furthermore, my discussion of the Duchess, which will come later on, as one of the more overt representations of cultural fears about female power in this play also relates to the ways that Hecate was represented: a malign force that ultimately proves powerless.

Middleton's Hecate is directly related to derogatory ideas about women, not only in the sector of medical knowledge but also by representing potentially malignant people in a household or society. Hecate is understood to be poor due to her need to beg a local farming couple for food (1.2.50-66), which places her directly in the realm of women who would often be considered and first accused of being witches. As scholars such as James Sharpe and Eric Pudney argue, poor, beggarly women, in particular, were most susceptible to charges of witchcraft.

Although Hecate's ineffective herbal spells may comment upon changing medical practice in the period, it is important to note that the herbs Hecate uses are extracted directly from Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (Keller 41). In Hecate's first scene, she calls upon such herbs as "*Chiroconita, adincantida, / Archimadon, marmaritin, calicia*" (1.2.162-163). Her son, Firestone, appears in a scene later in the play, bringing her some of the same herbs as well as a couple that were previously unmentioned: mandragon (*mandragora*), panax, selago, and hedge-hyssop (3.3.24-28). Almost all of these herbs have been taken exactly from Book 6, Chapter 3, of Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, a chapter partially entitled, "That women have used poisoning in all ages more than men..." Poison seems to be Hecate's particular spell carrier of choice. More telling even than the title of the chapter that Middleton chooses to use to inform his witch's practice are the herbs from this chapter that he employs in his drama. Scot writes that *Marmaritin* could supposedly be used to raise spirits, and *archimadon* was thought to make someone either profess evil or profess their own evils while they slept (67). However, Scot also writes that "all these now are worne out of knowledge…," suggesting that Hecate is using out-of-date and, therefore, ineffective witchcraft practices (67). It is interesting that these herbs are being used in a satiric play and that they are being taken directly from Scot, who was skeptical of witchcraft. Traditionally, herbs are a site of female power, having been used and consulted for centuries as naturally powerful substances. Stripping the herbs of their power, as Middleton will later do again in the play after Hecate's poisonous concoction fails to be fatal to the Duke, is another source of satire in the play. His use of Scot's contemporaneously well-known skeptical treatise on witchcraft coupled with what seems to be a satirical construction of Hecate and the other

women of the play guide audiences to conclusions about the nonexistence of witches and maybe even, by extension, of female power altogether.

That Middleton played into the cultural understanding of female herbal practices being outdated or unchecked by having Hecate turn to herbs that were no longer used further perpetuates early modern English society's understanding of the male-dominated written herbal tradition as more socially sanctioned. I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that early modern society's answer to the problem of a female herbal tradition—and the power derived from this knowledge—was for men to take over these concerns in the household. Elaine Leong explains that men in the early modern period often wrote on how women should be trained in the use of medicinal herbs or other kinds of first aid as the head of the domestic sphere in the household; this would be achieved by reading tracts and books—written by men, of course—on the subject and then conferring with other women on the remedies they had learned of from these sources (557-58). In actuality, the male fear surrounding female power in the realm of herbals stemmed from the inability to control the usage of herbal texts, stemmed from fear of the uncontrollable female practitioner, according to Rebecca Laroche (22). Men "took over" the practice in the sense that they stripped women of the ability to conduct the herbal tradition themselves, stealing the tradition, reframing it as a male-dominated and -sanctioned practice, and remarketing it to women as the "proper" way to conduct such practices (28-9).

This suggestion that Hecate's knowledge of herbals was inferior to that in learned writings produced by men in the time makes it clear why her spells and poisons are not comprehensively effective. What is interesting here is that Hecate has now taken the form of

an ambiguous figure, too: she exists in all of the spaces that would mark her as a witch in early modern culture—an over-sexualized beggarwoman who is also in a sexual relationship with her son—but she is an ineffective witch, and that ultimately does away with any threat she poses to the men or the patriarchal order configured within the play. I assert that the potential threat of any woman is corrected by the end of the play, or in Hecate's case, it was never proven that she had any power to be taken. She joins her subordinate daughters—Francisca, Isabella, and the Duchess. The difference between Hecate and the aristocratic women of the play was that she is never given the power she should have been able to wield as a witch in the first place; giving her this power would have, I believe, supported the idea of the possibility of a powerful woman in the face of patriarchal society too heavily. So she is left at having the title of "witch" but not the capability of fulfilling that title.

Such an ambiguous Hecate figure as we find in *The Witch* leads us to explore more closely the relationship that the aristocratic women have with their respective societal roles and with what I just described as Hecate's roles in the play. Francisca's position as a pregnant woman should warrant celebration, as patrilineal succession was an important part of early modern English culture—except Francisca is unmarried. The fact that she is single complicates her situation: she fulfills societal expectations of conceiving, and she exists as a teenaged girl yet to be wed—another important moment in the timeline of the woman in early modern culture—but her existence in both of these spaces at once creates ambiguity in her social standing. She is a woman between two states, which, for patriarchal ideology, should never be possible. Isabella, because of her situation with Sebastian, is a betrothed

maiden, but she is also wedded—and not to the same man as she is betrothed to, for her husband is Antonio, with whom she has never consummated her marriage. Her maidenhood was a respected and important stage of her timeline, but that is not necessarily the case once she is married. Furthermore, it seems impossible for her to be wed to one man but also be betrothed to another. Unintentionally, she has broken down the categorical boundaries set forth by patriarchal design, so she threatens this societal institution, even though—with her tongue—she professes to upkeep it by kicking her husband's unwed and pregnant sister out of their home. And finally, the Duchess seems to represent the stage of marriage in which a woman completes her patriarchal obligation to provide children for her husband. However, she is both a widow and not-widow over the course of this play because she thinks her husband is dead, but he is not. She actually comes back from widowhood in a seemingly impossible turn of events. What is even more shocking within the patriarchal framework is that it was her own doing which made her a(n almost) widow in the first place. In order to achieve this widowhood, not only did she plot to murder her husband, consorting with another man, Almachildes, and promising herself to him if he completed such a task—breaking the codes of marriage—but she also consulted a witch to help her name stay clear in light of this murder—an overt representation of the fear of female companionship and the ease with which women can be converted to diabolic means. The Duchess is, of all the women in the play, the most aggressively powerful woman, even though her plans are foiled in the end.

What is exceedingly important to note is that each of the stages that these women were meant to inhabit corresponds to Hecate's image as a trinitarian goddess. Not only was

she known, as both O'Connor and Barbara Walker write, as the goddess of the moon, the forest, and the underworld (O'Connor 1127; Walker 378-79), but she is also known as the overseer of the three stages of womanhood: "...virginity...maternity...and sterility" (O'Connor 1127). The aristocratic women in this play are constantly shifting between these roles, sometimes inhabiting more than one space at a time. Not only is Hecate's jurisdiction over these three fields important, then, but, in this play, as in *Macbeth*, so is the idea of her as a goddess of liminal spaces, as Sarah Iles Johnston explains (248). All at once, the goddess Hecate informs our ideas about the societal categories that these women should be fulfilling but also helps us explain how they can possibly exist within ambiguous personhoods. Such ambiguity could be seen as deceitful or of the Devil, for any space that women have of power enough to threaten the commonly accepted societal structure caused fear and a sense of threat.

The idea of the deceitful, devilish, and deviant woman is pervasive in this play—the witch provides just one representation; at one moment, Firestone even reflects on his mother's witchcraft:

> [Aside] Truly, the devil's in her, I think.
> How one villain smells out another straight! There's no
> knavery but is nosed like a dog and can smell out a dog's
> meaning. (1.2.90-93)

Besides the fact that Firestone has revealed his true feelings towards his mother—essentially calling her a "bitch," which shows the ways that patriarchal power structures inform even the magical realm of *The Witch*, a plot seemingly separate from that of the aristocratic

plotline—this moment is important because it can be read as directly correlating to the magic Hecate has planned during this scene. He notes that she is as villainous a witch as he is, and this would not be a problem except for the fact that she is exponentially more in control of the witchy world presented in this play than he is. Throughout the play, Firestone repeatedly delivers asides in which he questions or pokes fun at his mother and her sisters. He calls them "sluts" and makes fun of the way they smell (3.3.17, 20-21); exhibits frustration when his mother does not invite him to take flight along with her and her sisters (3.3.77-79); recognizes that, even while he is one of them, his mother and the other witches are all damned to hell (5.2.81-82). Yet he ultimately acquiesces to all of his mother's desires. As the only male in the witch plot line, Firestone takes a subordinate role to the central action, and he is not silent about his difficulty in accepting this inferiority. Hecate's power directly inverts the standard patriarchal order of the home, with the woman being the most pervasive voice in the action, a complete upheaval of the world of the aristocratic plotlines of Francisca, Isabella, and the Duchess. He is forced to voice his opinions directly to the audience rather than attempt to face his mother. Yet as I will discuss a little later, the conclusion that this play provides is that all extraneously powerful women will be silenced, corrected in their power over patriarchal structure. Hecate's complete lack of power, shown by her repeated failed attempts to perform *maleficium*, also informs the eventual fate of the other women in this play. Not only does the traditional Hecate illuminate our understanding of the trifecta-effect presented by each representation of socially accepted female categorization, but Middleton's Hecate's lack of power in the play also foreshadows the downfall of these female characters.

Francisca's entire identity in this drama revolves around her pregnancy, yet it is the context of her pregnancy that also undermines her identity as a pregnant woman. When Antonio presents the communal drinking cup in the first scene of the play to his sister Francisca, she says, "This's the worst fright that could come / to a concealed great belly. I'm with child…" (1.1.133-134). Notably, the complication with Francisca's pregnancy is that, as she states, it is "concealed." The fact that the unmarried Francisca should be a maid but is not—she is instead, certainly *not* a maid and has come to be pregnant due to the loss of her maidenhood—places her uniquely in-between two critical stages of early modern women's lives: virgin and mother. The amalgamation of these roles creates a monstrosity in early modern society. She, along with other characters in the play, struggles to cope with her construction as a should-be maid yet mother.

Though pregnancy would have been viewed as an evolution in the womanly state of being, graduating from one patriarchal category of womanhood to the next, Francisca's pregnancy leaves her somewhere in the middle of these two celebrated roles. When Francisca first soliloquizes on her pregnancy, she says, "I have the hardest fortune, I think, of a hundred gentlewomen…" (2.1.35). It is clear that she is unhappy about being pregnant, noting that, though some gentlewomen would be overjoyed at pregnancy, she cannot be due to social standards of female categorical restraints. This soliloquy never turns to the cultural importance of her child rearing, that she will become a mother in a world that is so obsessed with patrilineal succession, but instead rests on the idea that she must "save [her] credit here i' th' house," for her brother would surely kill her "if he knew't" (2.1.58, 59). Francisca does,

however, recognize the precarious situation her society often leaves women in and the expectations for women to fulfill their societal duties in evolving from one role to the next:

> Some can merry with a friend seven year
>
> And nothing seen: as perfect a maid still
>
> (To the world's knowledge) as she came from rocking.
>
> But 'twas my luck, at the first hour (forsooth)
>
> To prove too fruitful. (2.1.36-40)

Some women, she recognizes, could sleep with a man for upwards of seven years and never become pregnant, but at her first moment, she breeds the bad luck of pregnancy. O'Connor relates Francisca's position to an old riddle that specifically places women in restrictive categories, categories which are used to construct the boundaries that the female characters in *The Witch* should follow but do not: "a maid, a wife, a widow" (1127). The social pressures of remaining a maid—or at least, as Francisca puts it, a maid "To the world's knowledge"—makes her situation a dangerous one. She once again notes the seriousness of her situation even within the parameters of marriage: "If I had been married, I'll be hanged / If I had been with child so soon now" (2.1.45-46). Even if she were to marry the man who impregnated her, simple biology would make it clear that she had not been a maid upon her wedding day. There is no way out of this for her. Her existence between the spaces of maid and wife—the first being a stage in which women would not be expected to conceive and the second being one in which they *would* be expected to conceive—creates problems for her relationships with other characters in the play, too, not just with her own perceptions of

herself and her personhood. She particularly finds hardship with her brother and sister-in-law.

Though I will speak later to the ways her characterization subverts patriarchal order, Isabella, a young, newly married woman, supports the patriarchal categories that are expected of women when speaking about and with Francisca. In an interaction that occurs shortly after Francisca's soliloquy on her plight, Isabella cheerfully says, "Sister, methinks you are too long alone / And lose much good time, sociable and honest. / I'm for the married life: I must praise that now" (2.1.69-71). Isabella suggests that Francisca is losing good years for child rearing, that the "sociable and honest" thing for a sister-in-law to do would be to tell her so. Now that Isabella has married Antonio, the evolved state from maid to wife mandates that she push this patriarchal standard and political agenda onto those around her. Furthermore, such a patriarchal hold on even women's conceptions of standards for other women also commands that she be happy and feel fulfilled in the subordinate position that wifedom implies. As of yet, Isabella has no idea of the precarious situation in which her young sister-in-law has found herself. When Isabella secretly discovers that Francisca is pregnant, she shames her: "I'll call her stranger ever in my heart! / She's killed the name of sister… / ...She's undone herself…" (3.2.51-52, 56). Isabella implies a two-fold murder of character that Francisca has committed in becoming pregnant before she has fully graduated into the category of wifedom: firstly, Francisca kills off her own standing with Isabella as a sister; secondly, Isabella's comment that Francisca has "undone herself" suggests that, socially, she will be shunned for her transgressions. Isabella never thinks that, perhaps, it is not Francisca doing the killing but her own patriarchally indoctrinated thoughts that are

committing these murders. Nevertheless, Isabella confronts Francisca with a diatribe: "'Twas ill done to abuse yourself and us, / To wrong so good a brother and the thoughts / That we both held of you" (3.2.97-99). Though Isabella had at one time encouraged Francisca not to waste these good child-bearing years, she now sings a different tune. Once more, there is no joy in the fact that Francisca has conceived. Isabella is unhappy with the fact that her sister-in-law has conceived, but she is even more troubled with the fact that Francisca has now implicated her and her husband, Antonio, in this debauchery. Francisca has not only disappointed Isabella but has also dirtied the family home and name.

Francisca is also blamed for forcing her brother into a murdering rampage for her lies, which I read as self-defense tactics in light of Antonio's wrath. Antonio vows that Francisca is lost to him forever (4.3.64); he curses her and everything she has ever done for him or any time that she has kept him company (4.3.66); and finally, he condemns her for lying and also for telling the truth, since he now "Ha' understanding of [this] base adultery…" (4.3.68, 74). Though he speaks of a separate incident of lechery, the feelings Antonio has towards Francisca when he finally knows that she is pregnant are only further inflamed. Antonio provides the classic example of how patriarchal categories keep women subordinate in all phases of their lives, from their maidenhood through widowhood. In what should be her maidenhood, Francisca would be the responsibility of Antonio or other male members of the family—as the action of the play shows—who have the final say in her marriage and to whom she gets married. Antonio forces Aberzanes, the father of Francisca's child, and Francisca to marry (5.1.29-53). From this moment on, it is understood that Aberzanes, who impregnated Francisca and who is described by Middleton as "a gent neither honest, wise,

nor valiant," will now have control over the decisions of his household, which includes decisions made about Francisca (86). I mention the description of Aberzanes from the beginning of the play because this characterization of him, along with other lines from the play, implies that Francisca may not have been a willing participant in the act which caused her pregnancy. Yet no relief is to be found for Francisca, despite the circumstances. She will become bound to her husband and child, any agency she might have had being stripped in the binding of them to one another.

Though Francisca's plot ends with what might appear on the surface as a satisfactory ending for a woman who has become pregnant out of wedlock—Francisca perhaps finding peace in the knowledge that she will not be defined as a whore in the social sphere—she has actually only become further subordinated in the patriarchal system. Her pregnancy outside of wedlock posed a direct threat to the patriarchal system as it stood, and this plotline resolves such a threat by seeing her married off by her brother. She is enslaved by the indoctrinated people around her: her sister-in-law, her brother, even her own self. Throughout Francisca's scenes, it is clear that she is afraid to tell her truth; the ending she meets, becoming a bride to Aberzanes, is an end worthy of such fear. Her existence in this obscure space between the knowable female societal categories of maid and mother connect with journeying souls, caught between two boundaries, who are guided by the traditional Hecate. The trinitarian goddess, who, as I explained earlier, is seen as a goddess of the stages of womanhood, is present, too, in these moments of ambiguity, wherein power is held by those who disrupt the patriarchal norms. However, in this play, that power is always stripped away.

Isabella, on the other hand, represents an interesting configuration of subversion of patriarchal values in that she has proven her belief in these societal categories of women, yet her position as the wife of Antonio/betrothed to Sebastian complicates her position. She fulfills neither role because she cannot be a dutiful wife while also being betrothed to another man, and it seems impossible for her to be betrothed to another man while also being a wife. Once more, we see a situation in which the woman is caught between categories, even if unwittingly.

Because Isabella is less aware of her ambiguous personage, we are not given any soliloquies as to her situation; however, we can reveal more about this ambiguity by focusing on the actions of Sebastian, Isabella's betrothed, in his attempts to demolish her marriage. In his first scene, he reveals, "[Isabella] is my wife by contract before heaven / And all the angels, sir" (1.1.3). Fernando, his friend, immediately explains that Isabella is now married to another, but he curiously adds, "...though, being married / Perhaps (for her own credit) now she intends / Performance of an honest and duteous wife" (1.1.14-16). His suggestion that love has nothing to do with the "performance" of wifedom represents a recognition of the patriarchal schema at play. That Sebastian will go on to attempt to foil Isabella's honest and dutiful wifeliness is also an act of subversion, but I am far more interested in the unintentional way that Isabella subverts patriarchy. Though it is a patriarchal construct that forces the woman to be a part of the categories of betrothed or married, it is also the men in this play who position her precariously as a woman who will complete either of those roles as dutifully as Fernando posits that she might.

Sebastian takes his subversion of Isabella's wifely position even further when he visits Hecate in an attempt to create barrenness in Isabella and Antonio's marriage, hoping to part the duo on the account of inability to procreate (1.2.105-178). The discovery that Sebastian's plot against Antonio is beginning to work comes later on, when he exclaims, "It takes: he's no content" (2.1.210). Sebastian is keeping Isabella from performing another one of her wifely duties besides simple honesty and commitment, childbearing; even more than that, he is doing so through the powers of a witch, who in and of herself carries notions of subversion of the patriarchal system. Sebastian then rethinks his plot, however, considering the fact that Antonio's impotence will not gain him Isabella:

> Still she's not mine, that can be no man's else
>
> Till I be nothing, if religion
>
> Have the same strength for me as 't has for others.
>
> Holy vows, witness that our souls were married. (2.1.225-228)

Linguistically, Isabella's marriage to Antonio continues to be discounted by Sebastian, as he speaks of that fact that she is truthfully married to *him* before heaven, since she was contracted to him. And although he does attest to the fact that he has some feelings for her—he says, "My three years spent in war has now undone / My peace forever" (1.1.1-2), citing Isabella's marriage to another as his own "torment" (1.1.6). The work he is doing to undermine her marriage to Antonio seems based more on his rightful ownership of her rather than impassioned risks he is taking to win her back. His selfishness can be seen, for instance, in how he speaks of her in the above passage, wherein he claims that no other man should be able to have her until he dies. He does not recognize the fact that Isabella's standing in

society hinges on her being socially accepted as a dutiful wife, fulfilling the role she is now stationed in as Antonio's future child bearer. Sebastian's continuous attempts to ruin her marriage puts her in more jeopardy than it does him, which extends all the way to his murder of Antonio with the help of his friend Fernando; he makes her a widow, forcing her graduation to a role that she is not yet meant to play (5.3.21-59).

Just as with what occurred regarding Francisca, outside forces—Sebastian and his friend Fernando—correct Isabella's position of liminality. Once he reveals himself as Sebastian to Isabella and the Lord Governor—for he spends a good portion of the latter half of the play in disguise—her situation as wife and widow seems to melt away. She proclaims her joy in finding him alive, and the Lord Governor is ecstatic to learn, from Sebastian, that Isabella never consummated her marriage with Antonio, leaving her available to fulfill her commitment to Sebastian. Sebastian once more takes ownership over Isabella—her societal category fulfillment and also the purity of her body: "And though it had been offence small in me / To enjoy my own, I left her pure and free" (5.3.58-59). It is he—from the way he explains it—who has conceptualized her as a fulfilled woman now, for she can now follow through on her contractual obligation to him as a virginal woman headed for his altar. Isabella's earlier ambiguity enjoys the same fate as Francisca's; the threat she posed to Sebastian's claim on her is eliminated so that she may exist in a more socially acceptable position, that of wife to the man to whom she was contracted. To be clear, as I briefly explained earlier, Isabella is fully sold on patriarchal ideas of female categorization, which is supported by the way she treats Francisca. But her existence between the two spaces of betrothed and wived—a liminal space that she was unaware she inhabited—was a cultural

impossibility that needed reckoning so as to ensure the comfort of the men in the play. Undisguised images of female power make the men of this play and early modern English culture uncomfortable in ways that lead to corrections—or the stripping away—of the power in subversive spaces that these women hold.

The Duchess is the most overt representation of feared female power in *The Witch*. The plot to kill the Duke that she concocts, which also includes a manipulation of her servant, Almachildes, and a visit to the witch Hecate, connects most closely with early modern English fears involving female power in the domestic sphere. As I noted in my previous chapters, the threat to early modern English culture revolved largely around the threat of the domestically and socially familiar. As I have previously related, Dolan writes, "[In] representations of domestic crime, the threat usually lies in the familiar rather than the strange, in the intimate rather than the invader" (4). The closer to the home this threat is, the more power that threat holds over the stabilized patriarchal conceptions of a balanced domestic hierarchy. Though the Duchess recruits both Almachildes and Hecate to help with her plan, ultimately, the plot is hers; that she is the mastermind connects her explicitly with the kinds of threats that Dolan explores. The Duchess and Hecate are the most closely related in the ways that they extend their power over the men in their lives—the Duchess with the Duke, namely, but also with Almachildes, and Hecate with her son Firestone, which I discussed earlier. Hecate controls her son's life in the way that the Duchess now has the opportunity to control her husband's and her own. The deadly threat that the Duchess and Hecate pose illustrates this early modern fear of female power in the domestic realm, which includes fear of female power in regards to things such as herbal knowledge.

The Duchess' rage towards the Duke comes from his "barbarous act" in the beginning of the play, when he forces her to drink from a skull cup created from what was once her father's head (1.1.116-122). When the Duke comments on how the loyalty a daughter has for her father should give way to the loyalty she must grant her husband (1.1.127-129), the Duchess admits in an aside,

> Twice hath his surfeits brought my father's memory
>
> Thus spitefully and scornfully to mine eyes
>
> And I'll endure't no more. 'Tis in my heart since:
>
> I'll be revenged, as far as death can lead me. (1.1.137-141)

She proclaims that revenge will be hers, whether things go as planned, with her successfully murdering the Duke, or with her own death, as this murder plot is a plan that will see her executed if she is discovered. While continuing to plot, the Duchess further vows her revenge, giving the reason for her anger to be "his horrid game" that eventually ends with her further traumatization as she is forced to pledge allegiance to her husband in the face of her dead father's skull (2.2.59-65). But even in light of her rationale—what appears to be a sympathetic reason to plot revenge—as we learn from Dolan, a wife's killing of her husband would have been a capital offence, a murder treated as a kind of treason (2). The Duchess' vow to murder her husband places her crime within the realm of petty treason, a concept that stems from the idea that the husband is the king of his home—a patriarchal idea that held wives in particular contempt for plotting and following through with their husbands' murders. Dolan writes that this is due to conflations of the domestic sphere and the commonwealth, meaning that a wife's murder of her husband was akin to a servant killing

their master, or even to a traitor killing the king (21). Dolan also notes that the threat of the familiar is often "...[depicted] as an insider who threatens order as a woman…" (4). We see the Duchess actively beginning her plot for retaliation while keeping up the performance of the dutiful wife, making her a figure to be feared because she appears normatively; not only is she plotting in secret, keeping up appearances on the outside but planning murder inside, but the murder she plots is her own husband's, which is seen as a direct inversion of patriarchal power structures in the home.

Another critical connection between the Duchess and Dolan's work on threatening familiars within the historical early modern English domestic realm is that the Duchess has interiority—a voice—a fact supported by the Duchess's ability to grant audiences an aside, such as the one above. She has an understandable reason for her anger with the Duke. Dolan writes,

> Representations of crime, however diverse, construct the subjectivities of these dangerous familiars in predominantly negative terms. When they represent these perpetrators sympathetically, it is at *the cost of ascribing them any agency*. When they represent such persons as subjects and agents, they show them as *violent transgressors whose interiorities and voices are disruptive and destructive*, prior to and apart from the actions to which they are shown to lead. (5, emphasis added)

It is dangerous for the Duchess to be given as much agency as she has throughout this play, being able to force herself into a graduation of female categorical phases. And though the Duchess' motivation behind the plot to murder her husband may very well be viewed as sympathetic, she is still a representation of the danger of a woman usurping her husband's

control in the patriarchally sanctioned domestic order. The continual threat she poses to multiple men in this drama proves her destructiveness to patriarchal order.

The Duchess wields her power once more when she leads the servant Almachildes into a trap, forcing him to choose between murdering the Duke or dying himself (3.1.16-17). She furthermore manipulates him by saying that no one would believe his word against hers if he were to make noise about the proposition she has offered him (3.1.32-34). Eventually, he agrees, even after touting either path as death, after she assures him that he will be well protected and connected if he commits this treasonous murder, for she will marry him (3.1.44-59). The Duchess is already Almachildes's superior, but such deadly and sexual transgressions against her husband could very well be used against her in a court case. This would be a problem, except she has implemented the perfect control over this young man she has chosen to do her bidding: her power as his superior makes him unable to deny her, which would have been a patriarchally inappropriate power move for a woman to make.

After the apparently successful murder, the Duchess believes herself a powerful widow, but her power is stripped from her before she has a chance to assert it, the play revealing that her husband is still alive. But while the Duchess continues under the impression that she is newly widowed, she takes her newfound agency a step further, visiting Hecate to procure a death "sudden and...subtle" for Almachildes (5.2.2). What occurs from here is an odd case of female-to-female power struggle. The Duchess is dubious about Hecate's abilities, but the witch replies, "My power's so firm, it is not to be questioned" (5.2.34). Immediately, the Duchess asks for forgiveness (5.2.35-36). This appears to be the moment in the play when the Duchess loses the power she has so recently taken up. What is

to be gleaned from this scene appears to be a new hierarchy of the levels of female power: a manipulative woman is surely to be a feared figure, but the power of a witch, who is in consort with the Devil and uses her knowledge of herbs and plants for *maleficium* seems even more powerful. The Duchess kept her plots so secretive that many persons in the play did not even have a chance to fear her, but her position as a woman so ready to wield her power and change the course of her married life would have stricken fear in early modern audiences.

The Duchess's ambiguity resides in her identity as both a widow and not a widow. Up until the last moments of the play, there is no real proof that the Duke is dead, and almost as quickly as he is discovered dead, he revives again. For all of the Duchess's work to see her abuser dead, her subversions are thwarted. She is not a widow and neither is she a murderous wife, yet she must live on with a controlling and abusive husband, who exerts his power as the man of the home whenever he can. In the end, just as in Isabella and Francisca's cases, the Duchess is stripped of any power in the liminal identity of in-between, and the men are in control of this correction and also directly benefit from this subordination of the women.

The three aristocratic women in Thomas Middleton's *The Witch*, whom I have focused on throughout this essay, epitomize three critical stages as represented by the goddess Hecate: the virgin, the wife, and the widow. As I have shown, these patriarchally sanctioned phases of the female life are complicated as these women journey through such spaces, fulfill some roles of their should-be categories but also the roles of other should-not-be categories, and threaten the patriarchal structure that is set in place throughout the play altogether. The chaos of this play centers itself around one, very common, ending for

all of these women, Middleton's Hecate included: their power never extends past the end of the play. Each of them becomes subordinated once more, the men of the play often being the ringleaders of this action and the ones directly profiting from such corrections. My serious take on this play is impeded, however, by a popular scholarly reading of the play as satire.

The satirical nature of *The Witch* that Middleton's audience has perceived over these centuries complicates my reading, and I confront and accept that openly. Understanding the play as a satire, though, naturally opens up conversations about authorial intent, a discussion that I do not find helpful. Was Middleton questioning everyone's fear of witches? Was he interrogating the moniker "witch" as a catchall for deviant women? Was he hoping to show that there was nothing to fear, neither witches nor women? We could never answer such questions; we must work only with what we glean ourselves from the play that Middleton has left us. Though the plot points are ridiculous to the point of hilarity, I do not find that the comedy of this play would have led me directly to a reading of it as satirical and critical of witches and women had I never consulted other scholars' works. This is because many of the men in the play also succumb to ridiculous follies. Moreover, they, too, are caricatured in the ways that they are either valiantly journeying to reclaim their love or they are despicable and overly cruel. I would suggest that the satire in this play is a critique of society as a whole, every member of that society included, rather than focused only on the witches and women. By accepting that my more severe approach to such an amusing play goes against much of the scholarly thought on *The Witch*, I have also created space for discussion of less studied early modern plays to be considered in the conversation about female power, witchcraft, and

subversive identities alongside early modern cultural giants such as *Macbeth*, which is far more studied and revered.

The Witch is complicated for the many ways the plot twists and turns; the characters are difficult to keep straight, and often plots of murder or revenge are confounded and overlap. Furthermore, the purposeful absurdity of the characters and the plot points in the play as a means to achieve the satire that I discussed earlier makes any primary plot even more elusive. However, such chaos is patriarchally solved by the muzzling of female power and control that eventually puts an end to any plotting, scheming, or secret-keeping. All plots are revealed and foiled. Such a messy play may, on the surface, appear to have little to offer, but I argue that it is the adjustment to female power structures that take place in this play that directly correlate with the contemporaneous fears and cultural shifts occurring at the time it was penned that give it any weight in the conversation of female power and witchcraft anxiety that were rampant throughout early modern England.

Conclusion

[Staged witches] are caricatures of evil, embodiments of monstrous sexual appetite, part of a transgressive "world turned upside down" which contrasts with and in turn is overthrown by "good order." "Good order" is typically a matter of gender order. —Deborah Willis, *Malevolent Nurture*, 161

Willis's interpretation of the witch as a demonic portrayal of the subversive woman connects deeply with the thoughts I have been confronting throughout this thesis. Where Willis uses the term "transgressive," I have discussed liminality and subversion, collecting data on representations of subversive women depicted as witches. The "good order" of the patriarchy—that the man is always the head of state and home—is repeatedly demonstrated in *The Witch* and *Macbeth*, especially in the absolute ways that Lady Macbeth, the Weird Sisters, Francisca, Isabella, and the Duchess are either wiped out or put back in their correct patriarchal standing permanently.

That the men of these respective plays had to intervene in order to gain control over ebullient acts of power these women produce further solidifies my argument that there is power in liminality. Francisca, Isabella, and the Duchess in *The Witch*, though dealing in some ways with a witch via Middleton's Hecate, do not have demonic powers of their own; their power resides only in the subversion they exhibit, in their existence between known and understood patriarchal categories that have been created as a way to keep women perpetually subservient in their service to society. The Weird Sisters manifest effective demonic power but are also gender subversive in ways that explicitly connect with Lady Macbeth's call to be unsexed, all of these women actively working towards moving out of their patriarchal

categories but never redefining themselves in a knowable and comfortable way. Though the men in the play are thoroughly uncomfortable with the liminal and ambiguous natures of the women from these plays, the addition of Hecate—the allusions to witchcraft and liminality that her name bears—only fortifies the terrific power that these women embody.

As a threshold goddess, Hecate's territory may be defined as the "betwixt-and-between" referred to by Victor Turner, an anthropologist who discusses the very critical point of liminality within a culture's evolutionary timeline for its people ("Frame, Flow and Reflection" 465). Yet the absence of a "re-aggregation" back into society, a formal welcoming back into cultural categorizations, leaves the female characters I have discussed dangling between different phases of their evolution. They fulfill the assignments of many categories at once, even categories that should not be available to them, such as some of the cultural power that comes with manliness, maternity, or murder. Furthermore, they often leave the assignments given to their expected categories incomplete. Their fates are only resolved when the men from their respective plays forcibly shift them back into the patriarchal categories within which these male characters so desperately need these women to exist. Sometimes outside forces, even such as the author's pen, create this shift, leaving the male characters of the play with clean hands and, as is the case of Lady Macbeth, the liminal female character erased. The resistance to categorization that these female characters exhibit connects to the transgressive power of witches that Willis has considered. Buttressed by the identity of Hecate, who is explicitly concerned with liminal spaces and identities as well as with witchcraft, the women of these plays promote the image of the vilified, deviant woman in early modern English society.

Scholarly attention to the vilification and demonization of the subversive woman in early modern England is not lacking, but what is missing from the scholarship is scrutiny of Hecate's true place in these plays, what she does in terms of hinting towards correlations between witchcraft and subversive identities, and how she adds depth to the already intensely introspective lens through which these female characters—and, in turn, the contemporaneous playgoers who would have watched them—view themselves. Ultimately, the women from these plays provide snapshots of early modern English cultural ideas about what a woman should and should not do or be. The crushing defeat they face at the end of their plays reminds current readers of the intolerance of existence outside patriarchally generated categories, which these women deny and, for such, are dismantled. But the continuation of the mythical Hecate figure, who is never questioned in power and whom no man attempts to defeat in these plays, presents an archetypal figure who serves as an indication of the strength of liminal people—people whom their goddess, the goddess of ghosts, can readily reanimate at any time.

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