**Semester 2, CC T 4**

**The role of witches in *Macbeth,***

The witches in their appearance and in their supernatural powers confirm substantially to those of popular superstitions. Shakespeare has only rejected or modified the vile or the ridiculous and has heightened whatever could touch the imagination with fear, horror and a sense of mystery. The witches are poor and worn out, thin and ugly. They are neither men nor women as they dress like women, but grow beard like men, which makes one, like Banquo, doubt their sex. They are gifted with supernatural powers. They can move invisibly through the air, ride brooms, control the storms and the most important thing that they can foresee the future, cast spells and make apparitions rise. To do their charm, they use the most detestable and vile objects: toads, snakes, grease from gibbets, etc. They are weird uncanny creatures. They owe their powers to their masters, Queen Hecate. They are beings with supernatural powers, in Harrison’s point of view, but “not supernatural beings themselves.” Thus, they are the witches, in all means, of popular imagination. In their first appearance, the witches foresee the future of both Macbeth and Banquo. They greet Macbeth as Thane of Glamis, Thane Cawdor and the king respectively. The prophecy of Banquo is the strangest as they anticipate his greatness, happiness and being father of kings. Both of Macbeth and Banquo are affected by the prophecy of the witches, but says Hudson, “while Macbeth is beside himself with excitement and transported with guilty thoughts and imaginations, Banquo remains calm, unexcited and self-poised.” As they are the personifications of evil in nature, in Boas’s opinion, the witches are eager to establish contact with the guilty heart as that of Macbeth. Macbeth’s first words, “so fair and foul a day I have not seen,” are an expression of this connection because the first words of the witches “Fair is foul and foul is fair” are the key to the play. To them good is evil and evil is good which means evil will be good in Macbeth’s eyes. No one can deny the fact that the witches are real beings. If they had been a hallucination of Macbeth, they would have been visible only to 29 him. That is why Banquo is also able to see them. Therefore, they are objective and real creatures with an external existence and a deeper meaning as well. In their prophecy, they open the door for the evil thoughts and desires in the heart of Macbeth. This is clearly seen on his “start” when he heard the prediction while Banquo remains indifferent. The witches, thus, represent the amazing union of the external and the internal struggle of evil and goodness inside man. Harrison believes: The words of the witches are fatal to the hero only because there is in him something, which leaps into light at the sound of them. But, they are at the same time the witness of forces, which never cease to work in the world around him, and, in the instant of his surrender to them, entangle him in ineradicably in the web of fate. The influence of the witches on the action of the play is great. It is an indicative more than an obsessive one. The actions of Macbeth are not forced upon him by any external power; they come out of his hands only. He is very free to do whatever he likes without the orders of the witches. Their prediction might come true without shedding any single drop of blood. Duncan might die alone because of any kind of disease or by a sudden heart attack but Macbeth wants to fulfill the prophecy quickly without waiting it to be fulfilled by itself as it happens with Banquo. They tempt Macbeth because the temptation is already within him. Banquo is not tempted because he has a clean heart and there is no temptation within his soul. The witches foretell the future for Macbeth and Banquo without saying how that future will be accomplished. In any case, the idea of carrying out the forecast by murder and blood is completely his own. In short, the witches declare future events not actions that come out merely by the character of Macbeth. When Macbeth meets the witches in the second time, the situation is a little changed. He is now thoroughly linked with evil as he is behind the murder of both the king and Banquo. In the second foretelling, Macbeth decides that he will know the answers to his inquires and his future from the masters of the witches. Apparitions rise and disappear answering his questions without asking them, informing him with new predictions. They urge him to be bloody, bold and resolute. First, they warn him to be aware of Macduff. Then, they tell him that no man born of a woman can harm him. The final forecast is that he should not be worried until Birnam wood comes to Dunsinane. Thus, they encourage him and heighten his self-confidence in which “his fall, at the end of the play, is all the greater, more sudden and unexpected.” In their second meeting with Macbeth, the witches have still no power to compel him to do wrong and evil deeds. Yet, they have the ability to deceive him. They fill him with the feeling of self-security to act foolishly and recklessly. Macbeth has the power to reject their advice, but he does not do so because he is completely evil and wants to fulfill his dreams. No hints, plans, or any kind of schemes come from the witches for the brutal and most vicious crimes of Duncan, Banquo or the cruel slaughter of Lady Macduff and her children. The responsibility for such crimes is entirely that of Macbeth. The question remains: without the meeting of the witches, would Macbeth have acted in the same way as he does in the play. Throughout the play, Macbeth never tries to shift the burden of his guilt to the witches. They tempt him, deceive him, but never take away from him the power of independent will and action. No critic has ever tried to lessen the influence of the witches or the influence of the supernatural. They have the effect of lifting the crime of Macbeth to a higher stage than everything else. Quiller- Couch, a critic, suggests, “we feel that we are not in the simple murder of a king but in that of a cosmic tragedy, which although it has realistic features, cannot be related to our ordinary life.”Thus, the influence of the witches as this critic 31 suggests has been intentionally left vague and indeterminate in order to intensify its terrors. Macbeth does not sign a contract with the witches as Faustus does in Marlowe’s tragedy with Satan himself. All the same, he does sign a compact with them orally, that is to say, to exchange his moral values and start murdering everyone who stands in his way to the glittering crown of Scotland. Yet, Macbeth has certainly a free will and he could have rejected the witches’ suggestion, but he does not do so. It might be because of his ambition, however, he does not yield to his criminal designs before. It is certainly because of the obvious supernatural influence. Clearly, this can be shown during Macbeth’s first meeting with the witches; he is brought face to face with evil, with an awful force, which he cannot resist: Why do I yield to this suggestion Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair And make my seated heart knock at my ribs, Against the use of nature? Henceforth, the influence of the witches is vague, indeterminate, but all- persuasive. Therefore, according to Quiller-Coch, Macbeth is like a man acting under a hallucination. He continues: “He [Macbeth] is helpless as a man in a nightmare, he may struggle, but he cannot fight; he can no more resist than a rabbit resists a weasel’s teeth fastened in its neck, or a bird escapes the serpent’s transfixing eye.”The witches are important elements introduced to thrill the audience. With their prophecies, they excite suspense and fear. Because evil is good for them, so it becomes for Macbeth. They are the means used by the dramatist to arouse tension and dread. They heighten and deepen the sense of horror, anxiety, mystery and fright, which pervades the gloomy atmosphere of the tragedy.