Chapter Five

*Macbeth: A Villain-hero’s Tryst with Darkness*

In *Macbeth* the supernatural provides an insight into some characters – the two central characters Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, and also Banquo. The supernatural becomes “a catalyst for action”, only apparently. Unlike the Ghost in *Hamlet* who invests the hero with the terrible knowledge of his father’s murder and with the direct motivation for revenge, the Witches in *Macbeth* simply catalyse the elements of ambition in Macbeth’s mind and do never motivate him into action. They become visible reality only to Macbeth and Banquo and to no other characters, but their reactions to the words of the Witches are different. While the Witches’ prediction about Macbeth’s Thaneship of Cawdor (which comes true immediately) and that about his becoming King in future turn his mind into a turmoiled mood of contemplation, their predictions about Banquo begetting future Kings cannot affect him much. Banquo tries to dismiss them as earth’s “bubbles” and as “instruments of darkness” who “win us with honest trifles, to betray’s/ In deepest consequence”. That is what happens in the play, because Macbeth does not heed to Banquo’s words of caution and continues to workout “the swelling act of the imperial theme” by pursuing his ambition towards
kingship at any cost. Macbeth, as Banquo notes, starts at the words of the Witches and seems to “fear things that do sound so fair”. He finds the “supernatural soliciting” to be neither “ill” nor “good”, and yet he cannot wait for “chance” that has made him Thane of Cawdor to “crown me without my stir”. So he takes recourse to the unnatural deed to fulfil the prediction himself. Thus it is the terrible darkness within his own soul which assumes devilish proportion and leaves him to crimes after crimes and finally to his doom.

_Macbeth_ may be called a macabre play, in which ‘thick night’ – invoked by Lady Macbeth – covers the world “in the dunnest smoke of hell” and never almost does this darkness diminish. Some of the major scenes in the play take place in darkness and it is blackness of spirit which dominates all through. However, it is not merely darkness at the level of phenomenal nature which dominates the entire work, but it is also the darkness at the subliminal level that lends to the play its true spirit of all-encompassing evil.

The play begins with the appearance of the “three witches”. They are dark, sinister beings who appear in the midst of thunder and lightning. They have no names (except Hecate), neither do they exhibit any human emotion. Lamb comments:

_They are foul anomalies, of whom we know not whence they_
are sprung nor whether they have beginning or ending. As they are without human passions, so they seem to be without human relations. They come with thunder and lightning, and vanish to airy music. This is all we know of them (xxxvi).

They again appear with the intention of tempting Macbeth, but that is all they can do. Macbeth is nothing but "a wayward son, Spiteful and wrathful". He already has the seed of evil within him, and all that the witches do is to accelerate the germination of that evil seed. In fact, as is evident from the Hecate scenes, the witches do not themselves generate evil motives in Macbeth's mind, they simply provoke and aggravate his evil ambitions through their equivocations which lead to his ultimate disastrous fall. The purpose of the witches is clearly expressed when they visualize how Macbeth will bring his own doom:

He shall spurn fate, scorn death, and bear
His hopes 'bove wisdom, grace, and fear;
And you all know, security
Is mortals' chiefest enemy.

(III.v.30-34)

Thus it appears that the witches have been just foreseeing Macbeth's fall.

Peter Hall's words (from his rehearsal talk with the Royal Shakespeare Company given in the program of his 1967 production) justify the point:
It has been said that he [Macbeth] wouldn’t have done it if he hadn’t met the witches; but thw witches are not the three Fates saying go and do it, they see into the seeds of time, they know what can happen and what Macbeth wants to happen, but certainly don’t make him do it. (Braunmuller: 32)

Their equivocation makes Macbeth so bold and resolute that “he laughs to scorn the power of man” and this finally brings about his fall. The witches are not, therefore, as dark as they are made out to be. Rather, as Peter Stallybrass points out, “it is indeed worth emphasizing the ‘normality’ of witchcraft beliefs” (25). He feels that though witchcraft accusations reached an epidemic level in 16th and 17th century Europe, yet, it has been an integral part of society for a long time. He says:

Their frequency should not be taken as evidence for the truth of witchcraft (there is no proof, for instance, that witches eat their own children, cause sickness, plague or famine, or have sexual relation with devils) but as evidence of the social utility of such beliefs in a variety of societies (25).

II

This interest in the truth about the much maligned concept of witchcraft began as early as 1584 with the publication of Reginald Scot’s
Discoverie of Witchcraft. Here Scot has argued about the actuality of witchcraft beliefs. T. A. Spalding (1880) and W. C. Curry (1937) have also tried to compile a record of the Renaissance belief in witchcraft. C. L. Estrange Ewen in WitchHunting and WitchTrials (1929) has presented a scholarly account of the witchcraft belief in England. This study of witchcraft from historical and sociological points of view was challenged by the psycho-analysts. Coppelia Kahn in Man's Estate tried to present Macbeth's over-dependence upon the women (Lady Macbeth and the witches) from the point of view of his unfinished manly identity. Similarly Christine Berg and Philippa Berry in Spiritual Whoredom related the witches to 17th century anxiety about prophesy. However, a few years prior to this, two books were published, namely, Keith Thomas's Religion and the Decline of Magic (1971) and Alan MacFarlane's Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England (1970) which again brought into focus the role of religion and politics vilifying and castigating and persecuting witches. Another book that almost settled the argument in favour of this historical fact was Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief (1984) by Christina Larner and Alan Macfarlane. I have mainly followed this conceptual thrust here the objective of the present chapter is to discuss the role of the witches from a favourable perspective, i.e. more as victims of a ruthless custom and
a misogynous society rather than as direct evil-mongers. My purpose is to evaluate whether they are actually the dark forces of society or mere scapegoats selected to bear the blame for the misdeeds of the real dark forces poisoning humanity at large and the state of Scotland in particular.

Now, though witchcraft practice in the whole of Europe was a burning issue of the time, yet, in this chapter we propose to concentrate primarily upon the prevalent witchcraft scenario in Scotland and England. Here it must be remembered that Shakespeare was an English dramatist writing essentially for an English audience, but the subject matter of Macbeth was based upon Scottish history. Moreover, Shakespeare’s desire was to please an English monarch (King James I) who had originally been the ruler of Scotland (King James VI) and had played an important role in the persecution of the so-called Scottish witches. Obviously, these factors created a situation where Macbeth’s witches are an amalgamation of both Scottish “hags” and the English “maleficum”. Continental demonology, which enjoyed the sanction of religion, was pretty late in reaching Scotland and England. Christina Larner points out:

England was a special case. Witchcraft entered statute law in 1542 and witches were prosecuted in large numbers but, by virtue of a different legal system, without the full logic and relentlessness of Continental law. English witches were tortured; English lawyers maintained throughout the
distinction between black and white magic in the severity of the punishment they meted out, and the demonic pact was scarcely heard of (75).

On the other hand, Keith Thomas points out that:

In itself, the idea of a compact with the Devil was as old as Christianity. Pagans had been regarded as Devil-worshippers, and the legend of Theophilus, the monk who transferred his allegiance to Satan, was familiar to the late Anglo-Saxons (439).

However, Thomas too agrees that the strong influence of witchcraft belief appeared in England, only in the 16th century. And strangely enough, it was "left to the strongly Protestant writers of the late Elizabethan period to convey to English readers the contents of this great monument of medieval Catholicism ...."(Thomas: 440).

So right from the beginning a contradiction was observed in the spread of witchcraft belief. But soon many English intellectuals and theologians were converted to a total belief in the continental concept of witchcraft as accounts of European witch trials reached England in abundance. Moreover, works of native writers such as Henry Holland’s A Treatise Against Witchcraft (1590), King James VI’s Daemonologie (1597), William Perkins’s Discourse (1608) and Thomas Cooper’s Mystery (1619) inspired the imagination of native people. The English witchcraft propagated
certain specific beliefs which were peculiarly its own. One such belief was that the witch bore on her body an unnatural mark that was recognizable since it did not bleed when pricked and was insensible to pain. Another definitely English notion was that the witch possessed a familiar imp or Devil who appeared usually in the guise of a toad, dog, cat etc. These concepts became extremely popular in England and the Essex trials of 1566, 1579 and 1582 made repeated reference to them. Now, it would be relevant to remember that Shakespeare in *Macbeth* too, makes repeated reference to familiars in the shape of toads (Paddock), cats (Graymalkin) etc., therefore, making it clear that he was well acquainted with the English belief of witchcraft. Not the ordinary people alone, but the English monarchy too, has exhibited a constant fear of witches. They feared witches in various forms – as prophets who could predict their deaths and as sorcerers who could concoct spells and charms with the intention of overpowering them. Thus, in 1521 Duke of Buckingham was accused of treason on the mere ground that he had been in league with a prophet who was said to be in league with the Devil. Again, in 1558, Sir Anthony Fortesque was arrested for sorcery as he had cast a horoscope predicting the death of Queen Elizabeth I, and in 1580 Nicholas Johnson was accused of making wax images of the Queen (Stallybrass:26). In 1588, “Bishop Jewel appealed to Queen Elizabeth to take
strong measures against witches and wizards,” and “some years later one Mrs. Dyer was accused of witchcraft for no other reason than that tooth ache had for some nights prevented the Queen from sleeping” (Verity:175). These accounts, obviously, reveal that in none of the cases was witchcraft a proven crime. Rather, it appears to be a means of destroying persons who dared to rouse the wrath of the all-powerful monarch.

In Scotland, however, the picture was entirely different. Witchcraft accusations and persecutions, which remained within limit in England, assumed alarming proportions in neighbouring Scotland. Christina Larner refers to an account of the Scottish historian, John Hill Burton which says, “Our Scottish witch is a far more frightful being than her coadjutor on the south side of the Tweed”(69). Witchcraft accusations in Scotland reached an alarming proportion 1590 onwards under the reign of James VI. There is no evidence, whatsoever, that the King in his youth had been interested in witchcraft. It all began, as per Larner, when in 1589 King James went on a voyage to Denmark to bring his bride. Here he stayed for almost six months and during his stay he interacted with many intellectuals, and one of the subjects of their discussion, probably, was the continental theory of witchcraft. Certainly, during that phase of history, witch-hunting was endemic in Denmark, and there is ample reason to believe that the King was
influenced by this cult. Hence, on his way home when “equinoctial gales” rocked his ship, the blame was at once laid on witches working both in Scotland and Denmark.

Next came the famous witch trials of 1590. What was the real purpose of these trials – whether it was acute fear for the safety of the King; or a means of incriminating the Earl of Bothwell – remains unknown, but during the tedious process which continued from November 1590 to May 1591, more than 300 women were accused of practicing witchcraft and an equally large number prosecuted.

The intensity of witchcraft prosecutions rose to terrible limits in 1597 onwards, and G. F. Black in his book *A Calendar of Witchcraft Cases in Scotland*, published in 1938 named 1800 people who were accused of practicing witchcraft. Again, C. Larner, C. J. H. Lee and H. V. McLachlan published in 1977 another record of Scottish witchcraft, wherein they claimed to have come across some 3000 named “witches”. Larner claims that during her search she came across hundreds of boxes of “precognitions” (evidence gathered for the purpose of the trial) in the Scottish Record Office. This consisted of information regarding thousands of others who were suspected of witchcraft but against whom criminal proceedings were,
somewhere, not begun. This proves the insane height to which witchcraft belief and accusations had risen to in Scotland.

Now, coming back to King James VI of Scotland, we find that the King himself took keen interest in the day-to-day proceedings of these trials and the ultimate results. C. Larner in "James VI and I and Witchcraft" observes:

Certainly, the trials were to James treason trials before they were sorcery trials. The most appalling aspect of the affair to him was an attempt upon his sacred life........The King was the Lord’s Anointed; therefore he was the greatest enemy in Scotland that the Devil could have (14).

The King looked upon a witch as the Devil’s agent working to bring about the Lord’s fall by causing harm to his earthly representative i.e. the royal persona of his majesty, the King. Hence,

any attempt on part of the judiciary to acquit an accused witch was seen as a failure to take seriously the treasonable threat to the King’s majesty. The importance of taking no risk with persons who would be a further potential threat to his life took precedence over the question of the acute guilt or otherwise of the accused (Larner:13).

Therefore, when the judiciary acquitted Barbara Napier on the plea of pregnancy, the King was greatly enraged. So it appears that under King James, both in Scotland and in England, treason dominated sorcery. The idea
that the King was "the principal target for witches became an integral part of
the myth of Kingship" (Larner:14) and it became a means of glamorizing the
institution of monarchy.

A similar idea is expressed by the German scholar Michael Kunz, who
in Highroad to the Stake, explored the real reason behind the burning alive
of a poor Bavarian family, the Pappenheimers, in the 1600's. They were
arrested, tortured, put on an elaborate trial and ultimately executed by being
burnt alive at the stakes. According to Kunz, they were executed not because
they were Devil's agent, but to upgrade the image of Duke Maximilian I as a
champion of God against Satan.

It is, therefore, apparent that in England and Scotland, as well as in
other parts of Europe, innocent people were ruthlessly persecuted as
"witches", merely to satisfy the ego of the monarch or to uplift his image as
a champion of God. The purpose of the present chapter is to establish this
historical truth in respect of Shakespeare's Macbeth, a play wherein
Shakespeare deals in detail with the witches.

Another common idea about the large-scale persecution of witches in
England and Scotland in the 16th and 17th century is that it served that handy
purpose of barbarous women-hunting by a misogynous society. Various
cases of witchcraft trials, such as, those recorded by C. F. Black and C.
Larner, C. H. Lee and H. V. McLachlan reveal that of the total number of people persecuted in the name of witchcraft, around 85% were women in Scotland while in England the figure rose to around 95%. Though these figures are dubious, keeping in mind a large number of unmentioned cases, yet, it does assert that by and large the witches were women, usually elderly ones who posed a threat to the established social order:

According to popular concept a witch usually was: an independent adult woman who does not conform to the male idea of proper female behaviour. She is assertive; she does not require or give love (though she may enchant); she does not nurture men or children, nor care for the weak. She has the power of words – to defend herself or to curse. In addition, she may have other more mysterious powers which do not derive from the established order. All women threaten male hegemony with their exclusive power to give life; and social order depends on women conforming to male ideals of female behaviour (Larner:84).

Therefore, the very concept of witches was based upon ill disposed women and some available woodcuts of the 16th and 17th century present these women as females with distorted features whose very being appear to violate the established male concept of female appearance. There are cases in European history when the entire female population of a particular area was rounded up with the intention of eradicating the on spread of witchcraft (eg.
in 12th century Russia all women in a particular district were arrested, while in 1492 in Langendorf in Rhineland the authorities captured all elderly women, barring just two.

Another work of similar nature is Janet A. Thomson’s *Wives, Widows, Witches and Bitches: Women in 17th Century Devon*. Thomson has studied extensively the court records of the Diocese of Exeter and the quarter sessions of Devon and she points out that in a patriarchal society women fall into any one of the four groups – wives, widows, witches and bitches. Obviously, it follows that women castigated as witches were merely victims targeted by a patriarchal society and not real evils as they were projected to be. Again, Diane Purkiss tries to interpret the ‘witch myth’ from a female point of view. The author asserts that witch stories served as a means for women to establish their own identity, something which was denied to them in a maledominated society. Purkiss points out:

Women involved with witchcraft entered vigorously into a struggle to control the meaning of their lives (145).

Thus, Purkiss’s view was somewhat opposed to the otherwise accepted feminist theory that “witches” were women victimized by society. Her’s was a lone voice crying out for attention to an equally lone theory. Evelyn Heinemann – a psychologist and psychoanalyst goes against her theory and
re-asserts the misogyny theory of witch-hunt. She argues that in order to understand the brutal witch-killings of the 16th and 17th century one must first understand the mindset of the persecutors.

Thus majority of critics agree with the view that 16th and 17th century witch-hunt was in reality the severe outcome of a power struggle between male chauvinism and women trying to re-assert their own identity in a society, which aggressively opposed it. It is apparent that “witches” in Shakespeare’s Age were by and large women who were persecuted by the royal power on one side and society in general, on the other. The royalty existed in constant fear of treason, and castigation as witches was merely a means of doing away with any apparent threat to the crown.

Now in Macbeth, both these two points have been established clearly. If Duncan is accepted to present the actual lawful ruler and Macbeth as a mere usurper, then the witches who apparently join forces with Macbeth are as much guilty of treason as the villain himself. Again, the witches are time and again looked down upon and are presented as opponents to the established norms of society, which again may be interpreted as product of misogynous society. But are such reasonings actual? How far are these theories of treason and evil threat to society supportable in the face of intense speculation? These are some of the questions I keep on asking.
myself and their answers I wish to search for and establish through critical analysis. But prior to that I wish to dwell briefly upon certain other aspects of historical and social significance which I feel are intrinsically related to William Shakespeare and his personal witchcraft notion as expressed in *Macbeth*.

King James VI of Scotland, who ascended the English throne in 1603 after the death of the “fruitless” Queen exerted a definite impact upon England and its people and certainly William Shakespeare, was no exception. King James I henceforth became the royal patron of the dramatic company for which the “sweet bard of Avon” wrote (the company itself took up the name of “King’s Men”) and hence Shakespeare’s maturer plays, i.e. those composed under the impact of the Jacobean Age, demonstrated a deliberately conscious endeavour to please an extremely sensitive monarch, and *Macbeth* certainly belongs to this group.

III

Critics have singled out *Macbeth* as a “Jamesian” play on the ground that the entire action of the play is used by the dramatist to espouse King James I’s much propounded thesis of Kingship and Evil. The royal doctrine
of King as a representative of God on Earth is intrinsically related to James’s life-long campaign against Evil, which in turn is represented through his zealous opposition to witchcraft. Stuart Clark rightly suggests:

Demonism was, logically speaking, one of the pre-suppositions of the metaphysics of order on which James’s political ideas ultimately rested (156-157).

Clark also points out how this sort of “antithetical” concept evolved out of the idea that the Devil’s rule over the Earth as opposed to God’s rule through his King is as unnatural as the body’s rule over the head or the women’s rule over the family. Thus, we again come to the point that authoritative women in the age of “witch-mania” posed as big a threat to society as the Devil himself. But, returning to Macbeth, we find the play to be a definite avowal of King James’s theory of “absolute Monarchy”. Under the feudal system:

the King held authority among his peers, his equals, and his power was often little more than nominal; authority was distributed also among overlapping non-national institutions such as church, estates, assemblies, regions and towns. In the absolutist state, power became centralized in the figure of the monarch, the exclusive source of legitimacy. (Sinfield: 93-94)

And it is the question of “legitimacy” which occurs in Macbeth again and again. The play begins with a detailed description of Macbeth’s valour as
depicted in his battle against Macdonwald, the rebel, and Sweno, the King of Norway. In this battle Macbeth is reported to have killed the enemies in large numbers with “doubly redoubled strokes”:

Except they meant to bathe in reeking wounds,

Or memorize another Golgotha,

(I. ii. 40 – 41)

Yet, the killing is praise-worthy since it is sanctioned violence, i.e. meets with the approval of the legitimate ruler. Hence Duncan can only think of praising Macbeth profusely for his action:

O worthiest cousin!

The sin of my ingratitude even now

Was heavy on me. Thou art so far before,

That swiftest wing of recompense is slow.

To overtake thee: would thou hadst less deserv’d,

That the proportion both of thanks and payment

Might have been mine! only I have left to say,

More is thy due than more than all can pay.

(I. iv. 14 -21)

But when this very Macbeth kills people who oppose his usurped Kingship (just as he had done previously for Duncan) he becomes the “fiend of Scotland”, “the weed” that needs to be uprooted in order to “dew the sovereign flower”. So the same act of mass killing meets with two different
reactions; and the sole reason is that one enjoys the moral and religious sanction of the legitimate ruler and the other does not.

Now if the absolute Monarch stands at one end of the spectrum of Kingship, then at the other end stand the witches who are the prototype of Evil. For James I the witches stand for "antichrist", i.e. a devilish power that opposes the divine rule of a Godly king. To satisfy this attitude, Shakespeare right from the beginning presents the witches as dark, sinister beings. So, Banquo speaks of them with disgust:

What are these,
So withered and so wild in their attire,
That look not like th' inhabitants o' th' 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.

(I. iii. 39-47)

The entire negative attitude harboured by King James I and the Jacobean audience is here voiced by the right, honourable Banquo. So, the witches, as initially presented by Shakespeare conform to the Jamesian attitude towards evil. In keeping with their evil nature they establish ties with the evil tyrant
Macbeth. James I was himself aware of the practical anomalies existing within his much-propounded theory of Kingship, which he refers to while advising his heir. As the historian Michael Hawkins points out:

But James I, as a quite acute practicing politician giving useful advise to his heir, was, like Shakespeare, fully conscious of political realities. There is a neat Machiavellian overtone to his recommendation that one of the cardinal virtues, temperance, should be used in applying another, justice.

Generally in *Basilikon Doron* James I was well aware of how far princely behaviour had to be based on grounds of expediency rather than morality. (173)

So it is apparent that James I was aware of the real issues of his age, and like him, Shakespeare too was certainly aware of these political realities, and prosecution of innocent women as witches was one such reality. He raises such issues in his plays but "many of these issues are raised in *Macbeth* with significant twists" (Hawkins: 173). If at first the witches may be supposed to instigate Macbeth towards the murder of the lawful King Duncan, then, at the end of the play, they are equally instrumental in bringing about Macbeth's fall. So, if they were initially conceived as the powers of evil, then towards the end they must be looked upon as the powers of Good. If Macduff performs a good deed by killing Macbeth, then the
"weird sisters" too, act only in good interest while equivocating with Macbeth.

IV

Therefore, it is apparent that in presenting the witches, Shakespeare's distinction between good and evil appears to be hazy, and this haziness, I feel, was deliberately intended by an extremely sensitive dramatist. He appears to have a lot to convey and employs for this purpose his antithetical mode. But to understand this postulation further we must now analyze Shakespeare's deliberate deviations from his source material. Shakespeare's source for Macbeth is mainly divided into three categories. Muriel Bradbrook distinguishes them as:

the Scottish and English Chronicles supplied the facts, and one important scene; secondly, various works on witchcraft and demonology, including those of King James, gave some materials for the witches' scenes ....

thirdly, earlier works by Shakespeare himself present in a simpler form some of the ingredients of this play, and an examination of what might be called the internal sources elucidates its inward structure.(236)

These various elements underwent a unique fusion in the brilliant smithy of Shakespeare's brain, and the result was a play which was entirely his own.
Of course, of these diverse sources, Ralph Holinshed’s *Chronicle of Scotland* provided the main skeleton of the play. For his purpose Shakespeare adopted two separate accounts from this bald and routine chronicler history and transformed them through a process of re-vision based upon his own visionary power into a uniquely unified dramatic structure, which became a statement of his own political and social thesis. So, on one side it represented his own idea of kingship based upon King James I’s version, and on the other it highlighted, through a system of antithesis and ambiguity, his own definite doubt about the cult of witches as evil-mongers and Demonology at large.

Shakespeare’s apparent purpose behind the play *Macbeth* was to please King James I of England. Therefore, Shakespeare searched for material in Scottish history and came upon an incident which reflected back to King James’s progenitor Banquo. Shakespeare deliberately whitened the character of Banquo who actually in chronicler history was presented as a co-partner of Macbeth in his heinous deed. But in his play, Shakespeare leaves him free of any such charge. Equally deliberate is the blackening of Macbeth’s character by the bard of Avon. While the actual Duncan had been a weak ruler of whom,
It was perceived how negligent he was in punishing offenders.... [ and ]
.... manie misruled persons took occasion thereof to trouble the peace and
quiet state of the common-wealth, by seditious commotions which first
had their beginning in this wise. (Holinshed:173-174)

But in his play Shakespeare presents him as a gracious ruler who,

Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been

So clear in his great office, ....

(I. vii. 17-18)

Obviously, Duncan here is presented as the ideal ruler against whom is
pitted Macbeth, the heartless tyrant. But the real Macbeth of Holinshed had
been a good ruler who governed “the realme for the space of ten yeares in
equall justice” (180). But Shakespeare evades any reference to this peaceful
era. The purpose behind this careful selection and omission of historical
truth by the dramatist was to specify a clear pattern of antithesis whereby
King James’s idea of Godly rule as opposed to Devil’s rule may be
established. In Basilikon Doron King James had tried to distinguish between
“a lawful good King”and “an usurping tyrant”:

The one acknowledgeth himselfe ordained for his people, having received
from God a burthen of Government, where of he must be countable: the
other thinketh his people ordeined for him, a prey to his passions and
inordinate appetites, as the fruites of his magnanimitie: And therefore, as
their ends our directly contrarie, so are their whole actions, as meanes, whereby they please to attaine to their endes (18).

So, Macbeth’s death and the crowning of Malcolm, the rightful heir and son to the Godly King Duncan appears to highlight the establishment on Earth of God’s rule through his saintly king. But opposed to God and his King is the Devil and its witches. But are the witches as evil as the play apparently portrays them to be? Once again we must return to Shakespeare’s purposeful violation of historical fact and the antithetical pattern rising thereof to seek an answer to such an ambiguous question. Early in the play Duncan comments on the falsification of his trust in the loyalty of the Thane of Cawdor whom he had to execute for treason:

There’s no art
To find the mind’s construction in the face:
He was a gentleman on whom I built
An absolute trust –

(I. iv. 11-14)

These lines are commonly interpreted as instances of dramatic irony because his new trust in Macbeth too is falsified. They are, in fact, an instance of re-visioning of source material by Shakespeare. As Jonathan Goldberg points out, these lines were originally spoken by a witch. She prophesied to a
“trustie servant” of King Nathoclus that someone would kill the king “in whome he had reposed an especiall trust” (Goldberg: 478).

Then what was Shakespeare’s purpose in re-presenting these lines as being spoken by the saintly King? The general critical consensus about Macbeth was that Shakespeare’s intention here was to present a clear-cut demarcation between a saintly, divine king and an absolute tyrant. It was with this purpose, critics feel, that Shakespeare avoids reference to Duncan’s weakness as a ruler and to Macbeth’s “governing of the realme for the space of ten years in equal justice,” (Holinshed:180), both being historically true facts. But this theory certainly does not explain why Shakespeare makes his “ideal King” utter words originally spoken by a witch. As such “witches” in Shakespeare’s day and as propagated by king James were supposed to represent “anti-Christ” and thus the ideal ruler stood entirely opposed to them. So when Shakespeare makes his ideal ruler, the gracious Duncan, speak words spoken by the witches, then there appears to be a concealed purpose behind such re-presentation. At a first glance it appears that when Duncan utters the above lines he speaks of a past betrayal which will be re-presented in a future betrayal by the present Thane of Cawdor; but the reality is, as Goldberg points out, that the lines are self reflective. When Duncan says “There’s no art / To find the minds construction in the face”, it is as if
he is referring to his own image, for “has not criticism – with scarcely an exception – succumbed to Duncan’s glassy surface?” (Goldberg: 94).

Apparently, Duncan represents an honourable King, just in his office and gracious in bestowing favours on his subordinates. But this justness of his nature fails to present itself when he proclaims:

We will establish our estate upon
our eldest, Malcom; whom we name hereafter
The Prince of Cumberland: which honour must
Not unaccompanied invest him only,
But signs of nobleness, like stars, shall shine
On all deservers. – From hence to Inverness,
And bind us further to you.

(I. iv. 37-43)

This passage is highly significant and helps us to tear apart the glassy surface of Duncan’s sainthood and look deeper into his questionable intentions. As Kenneth Muir, quotes Steevens, to explain the historical position of Cumberland:

The crown of Scotland was originally not hereditary. When a successor was declared in the life time of a King, as was often the case, the title of Prince of Cumberland was immediately bestowed on him as a mark of his designation. Cumberland was at that time held by Scotland of the crown of England as a fief. (25)
The very fact that the crown was not hereditary shows that Macbeth too, had a claim to it. Holinshed clearly specifies that King “Malcolme had two daughters”, Beatrice and Doada. While Beatrice gave birth to Duncan, Doada bore Malcolm, “a valiant gentleman, and one that if he had not beene somewhat cruell of nature, might have been thought most woorthie the government of a realme” (173). So it is obvious that Macbeth, the most valiant defender of the crown, had the greatest claim to the crown of Scotland. Duncan too, saw this and his paternal instinct led him to declare Malcolm as his heir all of a sudden. However, in taking this decision, Duncan is obviously aware of being unjust, and it is this sense of guilt, which prompts him to declare his sudden intention of being Macbeth’s guest that very night at the Castle of Inverness. Both Bradley and Wilson have commented upon the disjointed nature of this speech of Duncan. They appear to be the result of a guilty King’s hasty decision taken on the spur of the moment. It is as if Duncan is aware of displeasing Macbeth by proclaiming Malcolm his heir-apparent, and hence the sudden decision to stay overnight at Macbeth’s castle is taken to appease the wronged general. Indeed, it is this hasty and somewhat unjust decision of the weak ruler, which prompts Macbeth to the project of murdering of the old King. For Macbeth comments:
The Prince of Cumberland! – That is a step
On which I must fall down, or else o’erleap,
For in my way it lies.

(I. iv. 48-50)

Therefore, there lies a strange affinity between King Duncan and the witches. The common view is that the witches prompted Macbeth towards a murder whose seed had already existed in his highly contemplative mind. But judged from this political angle, Duncan, with his rash and unjust declaration is also responsible for provoking Macbeth’s murderous design. And so when Shakespeare makes his saintly King Duncan re-present a view originally expressed by the witches, he actually attributes to Duncan certain evil motives. He presents here a Divine ruler with the intention of abusing his divine right. In reality Duncan appears to possess qualities which originally are ascribed to the witches. So what is the difference between the Divine ruler and Satan’s agents, i.e. the witches? Who is the real evil, the actual dark force? We find the question rising in our mind and we begin to interrogate the very concept of divinity in a ruler as presented by Shakespeare in Macbeth.

Harry Berger Jr. has pointed out that the early scenes in Macbeth are replete with elaborately concealed hostilities and clash of interest between
Macbeth and Duncan. The conflict is natural for as Alan Sinfield in "Macbeth: History, Ideology and Intellectuals" argues:

There existed the threat of a split between legitimacy and actual power - when the monarch is not the strongest person in the state .... At the start of Macbeth the manifest dependency of Duncan's state upon its best fighter sets up a dangerous instability (94-95).

So it is apparent that Shakespeare worked towards presentation of this inner doubt in the so-called saintly nature of Duncan. And it is this doubt, which led him to equate Duncan with the witches through a process of "revision" and "representation" of historical material. Goldberg has commented that though historical exigencies might have prompted Shakespeare in writing this play as a royal compliment: "Edward the Confessor touches for King's Evil as James, reluctantly, did; Banquo fathered James's line" (96). All this is questioned by Shakespeare's careful shifting of his source material. Is everything, Goldberg speculates, "The chance and wayward association of his 'wonderful memory'? the floating of his unconscious? ... [or] ...A conscious design?"(96).
The theory of “a conscious design” comes to the forefront again, when we study Shakespeare’s mingling of chronicler truth with “spectacles” in the “cauldron scene”, Act IV. sc. i. Here Shakespeare presents “a show of eight Kings”, which is highly symbolic and has a deeper significance than is usually interpreted, and it questions the popular interpretation of *Macbeth* as a play intended to please the monarch James I by supportively portraying his various concepts including his persecution of witches as “evil-mongers”. A common idea about “the show of eight kings” was that it was Shakespeare’s concession to the Elizabethan love for pageants. A royal masque was an inseparable part of Elizabethan and Jacobean court entertainment, and this show formed such a masque intended to please King James I. But this does not nullify the fact that this scene questions the theory of divine infallibility of a ruler as propounded by King James I in *Basilikon Doron*.

There is a projection of Shakespeare’s own doubt about the so-called greatness of the King when he makes genealogy and prophecy unite in this masque like show. For Macbeth comments:

> And yet the eighth appears, who bears a glass,
>
> Which shows me many more; and some I see,
That two-fold balls and treble scepters carry.

(IV. i. 119-121)

In order to see the future progeny of Banquo reflected in the looking glass, Macbeth himself has to look into the glass. And as Goldberg points out, a glass actually shows the spectre of one who looks into it. Therefore, when Macbeth says that he can see "many more ... that two-fold balls and treble scepters carry" meaning thereby King James I, he is in fact looking at a "representation" of his own self. So, through Shakespeare's selective use of dialogue and imagery, one King merges into another. King Macbeth on stage is re-presented as King James I sitting in the audience. This theory of spectral representation between the widely varied Kings is further supported when the first witch declares:

Come, sisters, cheer we up his sprites,
And show the best of our delights.
I'll charm the air to give a sound,
While you perform your antic round;
That this great King may kindly say,
Our duties did his welcome pay.

(IV. i. 127-132)

But who is this "great King" to whom the witches desire to pay homage? It may be Macbeth, but it may also be King James I sitting in the audience. So
once again there is a pattern in the re-presentation where one King merges with another. But, what is the purpose behind such re-presentation? Macbeth is an evil ruler – a murderer, a tyrant and a traitor whereas King James I projected himself as a divine ruler in his political beliefs and activities. So how is it possible that one can be the mirror image of another – that virtual evil can be re-presented as divine good through the looking glass?

And here we arrive at the theory of “political unconscious” as propounded by Fredric Jameson. In his essay, “Radicalizing Radical Shakespeare: The Permanent Revolution in Shakespeare Studies,” he explains “political unconscious” as one “in which residual or emergent features of social structures in dissolution or yet to come survive on into the hegemonic present and introduce a noise there which the analyst will wish to rewrite in the form of systematic contradiction” (325). And it is this contradiction which comes to the forefront in Shakespeare’s representation of the two Kings, Macbeth and James I, with one being the mirror image of another.

Thus, it is apparent that Shakespeare’s careful shifting of source material creates a pattern in which evil mingles with good, thereby calling into question the very concept of evil as propagated by his age. One such concept was the negative attitude to the witches, and the play appears to speculate
upon this dominating belief of the age. Shakespeare's Duncan speaks words originally spoken by a witch, his James I is projected in a mirror provided by the witches. In this mirror Macbeth looks and sees James I, which again, as per the law of reflection, is a replica of his own image. So all rulers become one, an intermingling of good and bad, and they are again intrinsically related to the witches. Presented thus, can the witches be castigated as mere evil?

"To any unprejudiced reader"—comments Terry Eagleton:

It is surely clear that positive value in Macbeth lies with the three witches. The witches are the heroines of the piece, however little the play itself recognizes the fact, and however much the critics may have set out to defame them. (46-47)

Rightly enough, a close study of the play reveals that the witches form the pivot upon which the entire play rests. As if to strike this key-note Macbeth begins with the three witches. They are an amalgamation of the English "maleficum" and the Scottish "hags". Like an English witch they have familiars; they appear on a heath (indicative of the barrenness of their lives) and in the midst of hazardous calamities such as thunder, lightning and rain. They can read into the seeds of time and can predict the future. On first observing them, Banquo comments on their distorted and emaciated figures, with female looks but male features like beards. So the witches, as presented
by Shakespeare are elderly women with wrinkled features distorted by "time's sickle". They have choppy fingers and skinny lips. They in fact appear to be violations of nature. The source of this image created by Shakespeare becomes evident when we refer to Reginald Scot's account of the women ruthlessly persecuted as witches. He says:

> They are women which commonly be old, lame, bleare-eyed, pale, fowle, and full of wrinkles; they are leane and deformed, showing, melancholie in their faces. (i)

But Shakespeare goes further and presents them as hellish abnormalities, brewing obnoxious concoctions in hellish cauldron, full of revenge and hatred, loving midnight, riding on storm and thunder and associating with murderers.

*Macbeth* presents a world of violent deeds and disrupted norms. While the witches themselves maintain the harmony of sisterhood, community hierarchy and order, they expose the falsity in the hierarchy-ridden body politic of human society. Terry Eagleton points out:

> It is they who, by releasing ambitious thoughts in Macbeth, expose a reverence for hierarchical social order for what it is, as the pious self-deception of a society based on routine oppression and incessant warfare. The witches are exiles from that violent order, inhabiting their own sisterly community on its shadowy borderlands ...(47)
In the world of *Macbeth* there is a disruption of norms. Here a subject turns against his King, a host murders his guest, and a body turns against its head. Macbeth was very much aware of his “double trust” towards King Duncan:

First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,

Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,

Who should against his murderer shut the door,

Not bear the knife myself.

(I. vii. 13-16)

Hence when he kills Duncan, he does so not in ignorance, but rather in violation of all social orders. The enormity of the crime reminds Macbeth of “the rape of Lucrece”, another brutal crime that also caused political turmoil in Rome:

Now o’er the one half world.

Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse

The curtain’d sleep; witchcraft celebrates

Pale Hecate’s offerings; and wither’d murder,

Alarum’d by his sentinel, the wolf,

Whose howl’s his watch, thus with stealthy pace,

With Tarquin’s ravishing strides, towards his design

Moves like a ghost.

(II. i. 49-56)
Opposed to this dark, sinister world of inversion in the human society is the orderly world of the witches. They live in a sisterly community and are forever keen to help each other. Even without being asked they are ready to provide “winds” in order to help in the mission of one another.

A scene of hierarchy is all pervading within them and they are forever ready to obey unquestioningly the orders of their mistress Hecate. As if to indicate the harmony and cohesive nature of their fraternity Shakespeare makes them speak in rhymes. It suggests an orderliness, which is never really observed in the human world ridden with jealousy, mistrust and murder.

Another positive aspect of these witches in *Macbeth* is that they are prophetesses and soothsayers. Though they speak in an ambiguous, charm-filled language, yet their inherent intention is never really evil. They have been called “imperfect speakers”, but a close analysis of their language shows that in reality they are the only “perfect speakers”. They are afraid of none and speak neither to win human favours nor hate. In the very first scene they highlight their creed when they declare:

Fair is foul and foul is fair.
Hover through the fog and filthy air.

(I. i. 11-12)
These lines have created much controversy among critics and have been variously interpreted. Kenneth Muir points out “the line is the first statement of one of the main themes of the play, i.e. ‘the reversal of values’ ” (5). It is the human world with its “vaulting ambitions” and “unsanctified desires” that replaces fair endeavours with foul aspirations. It is here that Duncan suddenly and unjustly declares his son the “Prince of Cumberland” in order to thwart Macbeth’s rise to power and glory and Macbeth in order to “O’erleap” that step brutally murders the old, hapless King, who was both his King and his guest. This is as heinous as scene as rebellion “For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft” (I Samuel xv. 23). In Macbeth “rebellion” follows closely at the heels of the witches and their prophesies. As if to justify this point, Shakespeare juxtaposes three different incidents of revolt which occurred, according to Holinshed’s Chronicle, at varied times. Shakespeare, for the sake of unity:

- crammed into a single act of war the rebellion of Macdonwald, two Danish invasions and the revolt of Cawdor – which happened only after the prophesy in Holinshed (Bradbrook:237).

But such rebellious acts of violence occur in quick succession in the play right after the arrival of the witches who appear to stand for the hazards of nature. The King and his sergeant are full of praise for Macbeth. He is
“Bellona’s bridegroom”, “valour’s minion”; his acts of mass murder are actions of highest honour:

Cap. For brave Macbeth ( well he deserves that name ),

Disdaining fortune, with his brandished steel,

Which smok’d with bloody execution,

Like Valour’s minion, carv’d out his passage,

Till he fac’d the slave;

Which ne’er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,

Till he unseam’d him from the nave to the chaps,

And fix’d his head upon our battlements.

Dun. O valiant cousin! worthy gentleman!

(I. ii. 16-24)

Alan Sinfield refers to this in “Macbeth: History, Ideology and Intellectuals” and says:

Violence is good, in this view, when it is in the service of the prevailing dispositions of power; when it disrupts them it is evil.(93)

So when Macbeth kills Macdonwald he has the state sanction, but when he kills Duncan he becomes evil incarnate. Similarly, Sinfield goes on to cite the example of “the arrest of more than a hundred witches and the torturing and killing of many of them in Scotland in 1590-91” (95), as another instance of morbid and ruthless violence sanctified by the Law. For a King like James I who believed strongly in the evil power of the witches, the
mass-murder of 1590-91 was "fair" enough. But for the innocent victims there was surely nothing more "foul". So it is in the human world that "fair is foul..."

But now, returning to the much-questioned female identity of the witches, we find that not only are the witches female, but also their superior is a female figure. This is contrary to the accepted idea that witches were the agents of Satan or the Devil. Though the "Hecate scene" has been much criticized as not being an original Shakespearean creation, yet it contributes much to establishing the hierarchical order of the witches' world. The scene certainly appears to form a coherent part of the main texture of the play. Eagleton rightly comments:

So as devotees of the female cult, Shakespeare's witches appear to be radical separatists who scorn male power and lay bare the hollow sound and fury at its heart. Their words and bodies mock rigorous boundaries and make sport of fixed positions, unhinging received meanings as they dance, dissolve and re-materialize. But official society can only ever imagine its radical 'other' as chaos rather than creativity, and is thus bound to define the sisters as evil. Foulness - a political order which thrives on bloodshed - believes itself fair, whereas the witches do not so much invert this opposition as deconstruct it. (48)
And this, again, brings us back to the cryptic, enigmatic declaration “fair is foul and foul is fair”. A political order, thriving upon male consensus could not possibly stand women who opposed their rule. As already quoted, Christina Larner points out, that through the ages women have tantalized men by their mysterious power to “create life” and any other defiance would certainly not be tolerated by a male-dominated society. So whenever women dared to defy the established norm of female conduct, the men folk struck back with vengeance and fire. The witches in *Macbeth* with their beard and ragged appearance flout these norms and hence their castigation as witches questions the very basis of witchcraft concept of the Age. The witches create apparitions who hold up a “mirror” for Macbeth, but in actuality it is the dramatist Shakespeare who is providing a mirror wherein society and the King (i.e. James I ) can both discern the true nature of “witch beliefs” and their political exploitation.

The language and words employed by the witches are also evocative of their positive image. The very first scene hints at the powers of the witches and their ability to look “into the seeds of time” and this point is further established in their next appearance, when magnanimously they bestow upon Macbeth future glory and happiness:

\textit{Witch.} All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!
"Witch. All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cowdor!"

"Witch. All hail, Macbeth! That shall be King here after.

Here, the witches serve the purpose of the Oracles of ancient Greece, and there can be nothing evil about such predictions which are fair enough. The language, too, is simple, and there is nothing ambiguous about it. But as "the tale thickens" and Macbeth wades deeper into the river of blood, the language of the witches grow ambivalent and their predictions ambiguous.

Prior to the final encounter between the witches and Macbeth, Shakespeare stresses upon the fact that there exists no congeniality between them. In fact Hecate is full of scorn for Macbeth who is:

-- a wayward son,

Spiteful and wrathful; who, as other do,

Loves for his own ends, not for you.

(III. V. 11-13)

She has no sympathy for him, rather contrives to lead him to confusion and final ruin:

Upon the corner of the moon

There hangs a vap’rous drop profound;

I’ll catch it ere it come to ground:

And that, distill’d by magic sleights

Shall raise such artificial sprites,

As, by the strength of their illusion,
Shall I draw him on to his confusion.

He shall spurn fate, scorn death, and bear
His hopes' above wisdom, grace and fear;
And you all know, security
Is mortals' chiefest enemy.

(III. V. 23-33)

VI

The spirits seen by Macbeth which lend him a sense of false security are nothing but mere mental and optical illusion. So herein Hecate and the three witches appear to be in league (at least emotionally) with the avenging army under the leadership of Malcolm and Macduff. Seen in this light the witches do not appear to be evil. Rather, they lead Macbeth to his inevitable end. Thus the witches act as instruments of moral-spiritual-good, even of divinely willed destiny. Shakespeare refers to them as the three "weird sisters" – a name that carries a special significance:

    The Weird Sisters, hand in hand,
    Posters of the sea and land,
    Thus do go about, about:

    (I. iii. 32-34)
The terminology "weird" is highly significant. Kenneth Muir points out that at first the word was interpreted as "wayward" but later it came to imply "fate goddesses" in keeping with Holinshed: "the weird sisters, that is (as ye would say) the goddesses of distinie" (14). This coupled with the power of prognostication of the witches indeed equates them with the fate goddesses. It was probably this concept which had led Dr. Gwin, as per Peter Stallybrass, to present the *Tres Sibyllae* in a performance at Oxford on 27th August, 1605. They had hailed King James I as the King of England and Scotland. Shakespeare certainly did not use the term "weird" unthinkingly. This concept of the witches is also supported by Kittredge in his Introduction to *Complete Works of Shakespeare*. He argues:

They were great powers of destiny, great ministers of fate. They had determined the past; they governed the present; they not only foresaw the future but decreed it (lxii).

This shows that Shakespeare was not only aware of the truth behind the social scenario of witchcraft beliefs, but also was interested in projecting these old, harassed women as prophetesses who could project into the future with their psychic power. This almost equates them with the soothsayer in *Julius Caesar* who cautions Caesar about the "Ides of March". If there had been nothing evil in the proclamation and intention of this soothsayer, then,
we can safely infer that no real evil is evident in the proclamation of the witches and hence they certainly can not be called “dark forces”.

Now, the dark, dismal world of *Macbeth* which is torn apart constantly by rebellion and bloodshed, treachery and revenge, is, significantly enough, male-dominated. The witches along with their goddess Hecate pass in and out of the play, and their function is often indirectly performed by Lady Macbeth, the “fiend like queen” of the “butcher” Macbeth. And as if to heighten the evil quality of these two distinct female “units” (the witches and Lady Macbeth), the soft, faithful and domestic character of Lady Macduff appears on stage for a brief scene. The pathetic scene of butchering of Macduff’s family heightens the diabolism of Macbeth the “overreacher” and Lady Macbeth the “fourth witch”. Right from the beginning there appears to exist a strange affinity between the witches and Lady Macbeth.

Macbeth’s imagination, which had been inflamed by the witches is virtually led to ignition point by his “fiend like queen” and the valour of her tongue. Act I scene v, brings her on stage for the first time, and the very first syllable spoken by her is about the witches, thereby establishing an instant association with them. She reads Macbeth’s letter:

They met me in the day of success; and I
have learned by the perfec'st report, they have
more in them than mortal knowledge. When
I burn'd in desire to question them further, they
made themselves air, into which they vanish'd.

(I. v. 1-5).

So it is as if Lady Macbeth adopts the role of the fourth witch. She resolves
to lead her husband to the act of murder, which stands between him and "the
golden round". She is well, aware of the "milk of human kindness" in
Macbeth's nature but at the same time has strong faith upon the valour of her
own tongue. She is determined that her husband will be the king and will not
allow any hindrance to his royal ambition. Judged so far, Lady Macbeth
does appear to be a ruthless power-monger, a she Devil who will not allow
anything to come between her and her fell purpose. In no uncertain terms
she declares:

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! make thick my blood,
Stop up th' access and passage to remorse;
That no compunctious visitings of Nature
Shake my fell purpose, Nor keep peace between
Here we find a deliberate renunciation of sex on the part of Lady Macbeth, and it equates her at a symbolical level with the witches whose sexual identity too had been questioned.

So, disputed sexuality, a popular criterion of the witches is exhibited by Lady Macbeth in the very first scene of her appearance. She is an "unsexed" woman by choice, and may be called the fourth witch. But if Shakespeare's plan was to present her outright as an entirely negative character (it is supposed to be modeled to a large extend upon the chronicle account of Donwald's wife) than he would not have gone beyond his source to present the pity-and-awe-inspiring Lady Macbeth of the sleepwalking scene. Is it the same Lady who had instigated the murder of King Duncan or had ridiculed her husband for her visionary imaginings? Then what was the purpose behind such diametrically opposite portrayal of the same character?

Alan Sinfield in his essay "When is a Character Not a Character? Desdemona, Olivia, Lady Macbeth and Subjectivity", in Faultiness: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading, has pointed out that the opposite shades in the character of Lady Macbeth has perplexed critics through the ages. Coleridge was probably the earliest critic to argue...
that Lady Macbeth was not the "fiend like queen" that most 18th century critics assumed her to be:

On the contrary, her constant effort throughout the play was to bully conscience. She was a woman of a visionary and day-dreaming turn of mind; her eye fixed on the shadows of her solitary ambition; and her feelings abstracted through the deep musings of her absorbing passion, from the common life sympathies of flesh and blood. But her conscience, so far from being seared, was continually smarting within her; and she endeavours to stifle its voice, and keep down its struggles, by inflated and soaring fancies, and appeals to spiritual agency. (lxvii)

In recent years, this undue dehumanization of Lady Macbeth's character in the early part of the play and the entirely opposite nature projected in the later scenes has resulted in much controversy among critics. The feminist critics feel that the female characters must be studied as complex entities just like their male counterparts, and not as typically bad or good characters. In *The Woman's Part*, the editors Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene and Carol Thomas Neely point out that the female characters are:

Hardly the saints, monsters or whores their critics have often perceived them to be. Like the male Characters the women are complex and flawed, like them capable of passion and pain, growth and decay. (5)

Janet Adelman appears to take a similar stance when she says:
In the figures of Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, and the witches, the play gives us images of a masculinity and a femininity that are terribly disturbed;....(53)

We are, therefore, again at a point where the inhuman presentation of the witches and Lady Macbeth both appear to be a statement against the stock portrayal of women in a misogynous society. The Elizabethan society had imposed upon women a docile and passive role. Active wives were looked upon as a threat to the established social order. Lynda E. Boose Professor of English and Women's Studies at Dartmouth College, has painstakingly pointed out the various forms of punishment that existed in Elizabethan and Jacobean England for the “scolds” and “shrews”, i.e. women who dared to speak up against their husband’s domination. She relates this problem to the avalanching rise of “witch” trials and argues:

The particular impact of this crisis in gender speaks through records that document a sudden upsurge in witchcraft trials and other court accusations against women, the ‘gendering’ of various available forms of punishment, and the invention in these years of additional punishments specifically designated for women..... But what is striking is that the punishments meted out to women are much more frequently targeted at suppressing women’s speech than they are at controlling their sexual transgression.

(244)
That Shakespeare was well aware of this problem is evident from his play *Taming of the Shrew*, but here, in *Macbeth* too, this problem is very much evident. The "witches", i.e. creatures outside the social order, speak in brief, enigmatic and riddled sentences. It is as if they are conforming to the restrictions of speech imposed upon them as social outsiders. But Lady Macbeth dares to break this rule of female passivity. The early part of the play reveals her as an eloquent, dominating wife who is ready to break all laws of female gentility for the sake of her husband. The greatest "honour" imposed upon women by a patriarchal society through the ages was that of "motherhood". Lady Macbeth breaks this social code too, and declares:

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 pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn
As you have done to this.

(I. vii. 54-59)

However, such open violation of social norms was bound to extract a price, and Lady Macbeth does pay. Shakespeare had a keen perception of the society around him and its gender problem, as is evident from majority of his plays. Judged from this light, the abrupt transformation in the character
of Lady Macbeth seems understandable enough. It appears to be a conscientious effort on the part of the dramatist to project the fate of an active and vocal woman who dared to take up the challenge in a male dominated society. In *Faultiness: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*, Alan Sinfield writes:

Strength and determination in women, it is believed, can be developed only at a cost, and their eventual failure is at once inevitable, natural, a punishment and a warning. Lady Macbeth is a fantasy arrangement of elements that are taken to typify the acceptable and unacceptable faces of women and the relation between them (56).

Thus viewed, Lady Macbeth's final degeneration appears to be a sympathetic poet's attempt at faithfully portraying the end destined by a misogynous society for a woman who dares to be bold and resolute. For his own part, Shakespeare appears to have certain respect for the "feminine principle". There are instances in the play where the side characters who represent the general mass of humanity refer to the degradation of the "motherland"—the general feminine entity. Therefore, Ross comments about Scotland:

Alas, poor country!

Almost afraid to know itself. It cannot

Be call'd our mother, but our grave; where nothing,
But who knows nothing, is once seen to smile;
Where sighs, and groans, and shrieks that rent the air
Are made, not mark'd; where violent sorrow seems
A modern ecstasy:

(IV. ii. 164-170)

Again, Macbeth himself shows this same concern for the depredation of the feminine principle when he reflects upon his motherland as a sick woman, suffering endlessly:

- If thou couldst, Doctor, cast
  The water of my land, find her disease,
  And purge it to a sound and pristine health,
  I would applaud thee to the very echo,
  That should applaud again.

(V. iii. 50-54)

And indeed, it is not the "feminine principle" in Macbeth's Scotland, represented through the motherland, which is alone suffering. Equally precarious is the position of women in Shakespeare's England under the reign of James I who thrived upon incidents of so-called witches. With Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare appears to suggest that the "female", be it at the supernatural or the human level, forever throws a challenge to the male social order. And the male struck back with fire and vengeance, as is evident from the historical accounts of witchcraft trials of that era.
We now wonder whether the witches and Lady Macbeth are really responsible for the fall of Macbeth? How far are they in reality instrumental in effecting the murder of Duncan? These are some of the questions, which we face at this juncture. It is true that the witches during their first encounter on the “blasted heath” inform Macbeth of his past, present and future “great havings” - Thane of Cowdor and King here after. Indeed, there appears to be nothing ambiguous in the speech of these ill-fated womanly beings to merit the name “juggling fiends”. What they speak about his future come true immediately – he becomes Thane of Glamis after Sinel’s death, and he becomes Thane of Cowdor who is executed on charge of collaboration with the rebels against Duncan. For both the first and second predictions to be true, Macbeth did not have to do anything himself – they were both given to him by luck or chance or destiny. So, Macbeth could look upon them as indications that the third prediction of Kingship too, would come naturally with time. But he does not do so; he decides to take fate in his own hands. And the moment he does so, he becomes responsible for all his future actions including the murder of Duncan. Macbeth himself comments:
If chance will have me King, why,
Chance may crown me,
Without my stir.

(I. iii.143-145)

But he is a man of action and cannot accept passivity of any form. He is ready to face all consequences and hazards for obtaining the throne of Scotland. He declares in a significant aside:

Come what come may,
Time and the hour runs through the roughest day.

(I. iii. 147-148)

W.H Auden points to this self-responsibility of Macbeth for the murder of the saintly, old King when he writes:

In Macbeth, the witches prophesy that Macbeth shall become King. If he had listened to them as a Greek would have listened to the Oracle, then he would have been able to sit and wait until by necessity it come to pass. But he takes it as a promise with which he has to co-operate and which, in consequence, brings about his downfall. (219)

So it is Macbeth who is responsible for his own downfall, and it is as if to suggest this point Shakespeare goes against the Holinshed account, and shows that Banquo remains untainted by the prophesy of the witches. In fact, he looks upon all predictions, even those made to Macbeth, as fair tidings.
His soul is taint-free and hence he is surprised to notice the sudden change in Macbeth:

   Good Sir, why do you start, and seem to fear
   Things that do sound so fair?

   (I. iii. 51-52)

   Even though the witches predict even greater happiness for Banquo as a father to a future line of Kings, yet he does not give much importance to the thought. Rather, he cautions himself and Macbeth about these “instruments of darkness” that tempt men with small truths and betray them into greater disasters. Though the character of Banquo might have been “purified” by Shakespeare with an intention of pleasing the reigning monarch King James I whose forefather he was, yet, it also serves to highlight Macbeth’s own responsibility in committing the murder and not that of the witches. Indeed, to blame the witches for his own actions as Macbeth later does, is, merely a sorry attempt by the powerful to make someone else bear the burden of their guilt. Here Shakespeare was following a practice common enough in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. The “instruments of darkness” actually operate from within the mind of Macbeth the overreacher. He is going to kill both a King and a guest, thus violating the “double trust”. The supernatural is now born out of a turbulent psyche
visualizing and air-borne dagger leading him to the chamber of the sleeping Duncan:

Is this a dagger, which I see before me,
The handle towards my hand? Come, let me clutch thee:-
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling, as to sight? or art thou but
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?
I see thee yet, in form as palpable
As this which now I draw.
Thou marshall’st me the way that I was going;
And such an instrument I was to use.-
Mine eyes are made the fools o’ th’ other senses,
Or else worth all the rest: I see thee still;
And on thy blade, and dudgeon, gouts of blood,
Which was not so before.- There’s no such thing.
It is the bloody business which informs
Thus to mine eyes.

(II. i. 33-49)

Macbeth commits the heinous act of murder and appears before Lady Macbeth with two bloodstained daggers that he has used. He is totally
bewildered and mentally unsettled, as he hears the shrieks of an owl. Lady Macbeth rebukes him for such infirmity and says that she herself would have murdered Duncan “had he not resembled my father as he slept”. Macbeth cannot still recover from the shock of his crime and hears a supernatural voice crying out “Sleep no more: Macbeth does murder sleep”:

Still it cried, “Sleep no more!” to all the house:

“Glamis hath murther’d Sleep, and therefore Cawdor
Shall sleep no more, Macbeth shall sleep no more!”

(II. ii. 40-42)

After Macbeth becomes the new King through usurpation, he cannot rest assured, particularly because he is aware of the prediction of the witches about Banquo begetting future Kings, so he plans to assassinate Banquo and his son Fleance. As a royal banquet is in session, the murderers employed by Macbeth secretly inform him that Banquo has been disposed of, but Fleance has escaped. Banquo’s Ghost is seen by Macbeth occupying Macbeth’s seat during the banquet, and Macbeth cries out:

Thou canst not say, I did it: never shake
Thy gory locks at me.

(III. iv. 49-50)

Lady Macbeth tries to dismiss the vision as “the very painting of your fear” like the air-drawn dagger. But the Ghost reappears twice and completely
unsettles Macbeth's efforts at recovery. The banquet celebration fails, and the invited lords who are confirmed about Macbeth's new crime gradually disperse. Unlike the witches, the Ghost which is visible only to Macbeth is just a projection of his guilt-ridden soul. The significant point about the function of the supernatural in this context is that Macbeth is induced into crimes after crimes by his own overreaching ambitions and not by any supernatural force.

VIII

Now, coming to Lady Macbeth, we once again preview her guilt in forcing Macbeth towards the murder of Duncan. She is first introduced to the audience as a dedicated, though somewhat impatient wife. She enters stage for the first time reading Macbeth's letter which informs her of his meeting with the witches and their great predictions.

The letter inflames Lady Macbeth for she at once grasps the actual news which Macbeth desires to convey to her – the prospect of his future Kingship. He does not wish his wife to rejoice at his victory against the rebels; or at his becoming the Thane of Cawdor. Instead her joy should stem out of her knowledge of "what greatness is promis'd". So, the first cue to
this entire tale of murder is provided by Macbeth himself and all Lady Macbeth does is built upon it. In fact, there had been a time in the past when Macbeth himself had discussed the murder with his wife. Lady Macbeth alludes to this incident specifically when she says:

What beast was’t then,  
That made you break this enterprise to me?  
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. Nor time, nor place,  
Did then adhere, and yet you would make both:

(I. vii. 47-53)

Kenneth Muir points out, “Chambers and others use this to show that the murder was discussed before the action of the play or in a lost scene” (42). Obviously this shows that the “project of murder” was a child of Macbeth’s own “o’er-leaping ambition” and all Lady Macbeth does is to nourish it like a faithful wife. In so doing, she ignores her own womanly nature but later on, the burden of the crime weighs heavily upon the minds of both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. While Macbeth goes on wading further into bloodshed, Lady Macbeth gradually breaks down. Once she becomes the Queen the whole enterprise loses meaning for her. The sleep-walking scene presents her in a state of remorse and suffering, crying out about
murky Hell, about old Duncan having “had so much blood in him” and this smell of blood which “all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten”. Indeed, had Lady Macbeth been truly “fiend-like” or had she been a cold-blooded murderess, she would certainly not have felt such frustration, heart-break or anguish. Sigmund Freud, the famous psychoanalyst refers to this “breakdown” in Lady Macbeth and tries to infer if:

....in Lady Macbeth an originally gentle and womanly nature had been worked upto a concentration and high tension which could not endure for long .... (236).

Indeed, her womanly nature manifests itself through her breakdown and a silent but irrevocable distancing of herself from her husband for whom she had once been “partner in greatness”. Macbeth, on the other hand, progresses from murder to murder. His imaginative mind does torture him from time to time with “compunctious visitings of nature”, but there is no stopping him now. He no longer cares for his devoted wife who had once dared to “unsex” herself for his cause. Even when Lady Macbeth ends her life, all that Macbeth can say is:

She should have died hereafter:

There would have been time for such a word –

(V. v. 17-18)
And it is for this man that Lady Macbeth had virtually given herself over to the “Spirits of Darkness”, put “rancours” into her “vessel of peace”. Truly, what can be more tragic!

Now, coming to the antithetical pattern, we find that the play *Macbeth* begins amidst thunder and lightning and with the arrival of three witches who look like women and yet their beards prove that they are not women; they look not like the inhabitants of the earth and yet are upon it – they are creatures who are, in short, the very antithesis of what they appear to be. Before vanishing, they declare in precise, antithetical language:

Fair is foul, and foul is fair:

Hover through the fog and filthy air.

(I. i. 11-12)

Their powerful words at once strike the keynote of the play which is the creation of an ambivalent atmosphere where doubt and mystery rule. The entire play operates through a careful selection of antithetical pattern that operates in a pulsating manner like the alternate projection of light and darkness. Every thought and action presented in the play, every dialogue uttered by the characters, is countered by an alternate thought or action, word or feeling, which helps in the sustenance of the very spirit of mystery projected by the play. And this antithetical structure appears to be central to Shakespeare’s worldview and hints at a layer of significance that is
antithetically opposed to the apparent concept, which the play ostensibly reveals. For instance, as already pointed out, the play *Macbeth* appears to uphold the principle of ideal Kingship as propounded by King James I. But if we study the antithetical pattern we find that there exists reason enough to question Shakespeare’s own notion of the “Divine Ruler”.

Antithesis very much operates in this play in Shakespeare’s use of the notion of “double” repeatedly. Almost every important speech or action in the play has a “double” layer of significance with usually one being antithetically opposed to the other. Therefore, when Lady Macbeth welcomes the old King Duncan within her battlements, she says:

\begin{quote}
All our service,
In every point twice done, and then done double,
Were poor and single business, to contend
Against those honours deep and broad, wherewith
Your majesty loads our house:
\end{quote}

(I. vi. 14-18)

Truly enough, her welcome is double-layered – she speaks welcome but does not really wish “well” the coming of the King. Again, she does welcome the King for she is indeed delighted by the “fatal entrance” of Duncan, which has provided her an opportunity to dispatch him to death.
Two other scenes of such structural antithesis is the so called “Porter Scene”, i.e. Act II, scene iii and the “cauldron scene”, i.e. Act IV, scene i. Both the scenes are striking with the Porter speaking of Hell and the witches raising mystical apparitions. The Porter represents this human world and yet, in his drunken frenzy he imagines Macbeth's castle to be a veritable hell. On the other hand, the witches represent the “inhuman” world and the apparitions they call up challenge the humanity of the human world. So the witches are the antithetical opposite of the Porter and yet the purpose of both is the same – to present a world, which is akin to hell on account of unbridled greed and ambition. The Porter first talks in equivocation:

   Faith, here's an equivocator, that could swear in
   both the scales against either scale; who com-
milted treason enough for God's sake, yet could
   not equivocate to Heaven.

   (II. iii. 8-11).

For contemporary audience the allusion was clear enough. As critics like Dowden, Kenneth Muir, etc. have pointed out, the reference was to the ill-famed gunpowder plot of 5th Nov, 1605 under the leadership of Dr. Henry Garnett, a Jesuit priest who upon being caught had tried to seek shelter under the doctrine of equivocation. But there are again critics who try to relate this reference to the Earl of Gowrie, who claimed his lineage to Banquo and had,
therefore aimed at murdering the King in 1600. Again, as Kenneth Muir points out, Dowden in New Variorum Edition (1903) thinks that:

.... [We] ...should ask whether Shakespeare did not make the porter use this word.... with unconscious reference to Macbeth, who even then had begun to find that he could not 'equivocate to Heaven'. (61)

Again, Steven Mullaney too, refers to this Gowrie incident as quoted in Gowrie Conspiracie and relates him to the traitor on stage (Macbeth) and the two of them to "the ritual and representation of treason in the renaissance"(109).

So, the point is, whoever may be the equivocator, he is actually a human figure who truly presents a threat to the King and society on account of his own political ambition. Antithetically balanced to them is the dark figure of the witches who speak the truth only to be misunderstood. The witches do not curse Macbeth, it is he himself who lets loose all calamity when he in the "Cauldron scene" demands of the witches to reveal further knowledge about his future:

I conjure you, by that which you profess,
Howe’er you come to know it, answer me:
Though you untie the winds and let them fight
Against the Churches; though the yesty waves
Confound and swallow navigation up;
Though bladed corn be lodg’d and trees blown down;
Though castles topple on their warders’ heads;
Though palaces and pyramids do slope
Their heads to their foundations; though the treasure
Of nature’s germens tumble all together,
Even till destruction sicken; answer me
To what I ask you.

(IV. i. 50-60)

G. Wilson Knight refers to this scene and adequately points out:

These are the forces of destruction and disorder Macbeth must now loose – against himself. This speech is followed by the three ‘apparitions’; and we see how the interruption of natural laws itself recoils on him – Birnam wood is to move to Dunsinane, or appear to him to do so; and Macduff, not ‘born of woman’ will be the appointed angel of revenge (136).

Therefore, when the apparitions in Act IV, scene i, tell Macbeth to “Beware the thane of Fife”, to “laugh to scorn / The power of man, for none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth” and “Macbeth shall never vanquish’d be, until / Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill / Shall come against him” – they are in fact, speaking the truth, though, Macbeth in his pride and a misleading sense of self assurance feels the prophesies to be in his favour. And when his own self-assurance and avalanching misdeeds lead to his ultimate fall, he blames the “juggling fiends” who “lies like truth”. Indeed,
such castigation is nothing but a venting of frustration by a disgruntled monarch.

Not only is the structure of *Macbeth* antithetical, but also its themes. As G. Wilson Knight in "*Macbeth* and the Metaphysics of Evil" points out that all major scenes in the play are presented through cumulative questionings and they together serve to heighten the perplexing, antithetical atmosphere of the play. "Probably in no play of Shakespeare", argues Knight, "are so many questions asked" (141). And one of the major questions which *Macbeth* presents, pertains to the raging issue of femininity versus masculinity. *Macbeth* presents a world of distorted femininity represented by the witches and Lady Macbeth. Lady Macduff appears on stage only once and she is brought in only to strike a contrast to the "unwomanly women". Pitted against them is the entirely masculine world of Duncan and his two sons, Banquo and his son, and Macduff, a man not "born of woman". There is a sharp contrast between the two worlds and as Stuart Clark points out:

Contrariety was .... a universal principle of intelligibility as well as a statement about how the world was actually constituted. (110)

It also serves to highlight the dramatist's own notion of the real reason behind witchcraft trials. Female atrocity or arrogance was not to be tolerated by a misogynous society and it struck back by castigating such women as
“witches”. So, Macbeth is not called a witch though he commits the murder (he is called “monster”, “butcher” etc. but never a witch or a wizard). But Lady Macbeth is called “fiend like” though the later scenes reveal that she was much more humane than Macbeth. Indeed, the character of Lady Macbeth “operates as a specific closure of discourse within the binary opposition of virago (witch)/wife” (Stallybrass: 33). And this shows an “inversion” which was symbolic of society in Shakespeare’s day. Jonathan Dollimore refers to this point as he questions the validity of such an opinion:

Was such inversion reinforcing of the status quo – licensed misrule acting as the safety valve for social conflict and thus perpetuating the dominant order – or did it endanger it, stimulating rebellion? (26)

Shakespeare’s play seems to hint at this conflict, and we wonder whether witch persecution and burning, a licensed violence, was not merely a means of diverting the subjects’ attention from more practical issues, which might have proved troublesome and dangerous for the monarch. So, it indeed was a “safety valve” utilised by the monarch with the intention of presenting himself as the glorious champion of God’s Holy Cause and thereby “perpetuating the dominant order”.

Another antithetical issue presented by Macbeth is the point of diversion between the supernatural powers actually shown to be existing by the dramatist (i.e. the witches) and those which he presents merely as
concoctions by a susceptible brain (i.e. the Ghost of Banquo). The witches during their first encounter with Macbeth had been visible to Banquo too, thereby confirming their actual, worldly existence. On the other hand, Banquo’s Ghost is visible only to Macbeth. Neither Lady Macbeth, nor the assembled Lords see it and therefore, Lady Macbeth comments:

O proper stuff!
This is the very painting of your fear:
This is the air drawn dragger, which, you said,
Led you to Duncan. O! these flaws and starts
( Imposters to true fear ), would well become
A woman’s story at a winter’s fire,
Authoris’d by her grandma.

(III. iv. 60-65)

So, even to Macbeth’s own wife, the ghost of Banquo with gory locks is as unreal and fictional an entity as an old woman’s tale told on a wintry night. But Shakespeare creates the witches who are a vivid reality. While Banquo’s Ghost symbolically de-thrones Macbeth, the witches truly operate to end his reign. In this sense they are on the side of the lawful ruler working against a tyrant to bring about his final ruin. The dramatist operates constantly to highlight this point. He probably had in mind the thousands of innocent women killed as witches and hence, though his witches kill swine
and torture the husband of the "rump-fed ronyon", yet, they never go further than that. These images were obviously created to please the pit audience, but for the intellectuals the message was different. A spectator with a penetrating view obviously saw what Reginald Scot had earlier tried to prove. The witches are not evil, rather they are the avenging forces who through their prophecies set the ball of justice rolling against Macbeth. Philip C. McGuire adequately sums up:

In time, through time, over time, Macbeth becomes the traitors against whom he first fights. He becomes the thane of Cawdor, in title and in treacherous deed, and his head, severed like Macdonwald’s, becomes a display for all to learn from. Audience (but not readers) see Macbeth’s head, and the lesson it teaches is as double-edged as the swords and daggers audiences (but not readers) see during the play. Treason does not prosper; treason does recur. If Macbeth teaches a lesson, it, too, is double-edged. Good triumphs over evil; good can become evil. ‘Fair is foul, and foul is fair’. (129)

So, in this world of Shakespearean conception “good becomes evil” but society unknowingly castigates the so-called witches who never cease to operate for the good cause. In a play of treachery and inverted norms it is only the witches who speak the truth. Never once do they speak the “untruth” though ambitious men led by their false dreams misinterpret them.
So if truth stands for good, then the witches too, represent good and any one who opposes them, be it the King or his subjects, the intellectuals or the laymen, all represent the real dark forces. Thus interpreted, the witches no longer appear to be the dark forces, rather it is their inhuman tormenters, i.e. the powers of the day who may be called the real dark forces of society. The message of the humanitarian dramatist appears to be clear enough and is sent echoing through the foggy and filthy air of a superstitious Age in the very first scene of *Macbeth*:

"Fair is foul, and foul is fair"
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