Power of Fate Through Light and Sound in Rupert Goold’s *Macbeth*

For Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, filmmakers often rely on various uses of light, sound, and historical aspects of Shakespeare’s time in order to create their films in a way they believe Shakespeare would condone. The witches in *Macbeth* represent a control over the fate of Macbeth which is portrayed in Rupert Goold’s film adaptation to show how they hold the ultimate power over Macbeth’s fate and how they allow him temporary control over time in order to drive the plot. Through historical evidence of witches, Goold displays the ways that the witches and film use light, sound and the transposition of Hecate’s lines in order to reveal they hold the ultimate control over the fate of others. Without Macbeth’s temporary control over time that the witches give him, his destiny relies on the actions of his past instead of fate itself.

In Goold’s 2010 adaptation of *Macbeth*, Goold develops a witch scene in Act 4 Scene 1 with various uses of film art in order to suggest the witches’ power over Macbeth’s fate in the play. In order to fully grasp what the light and sound does in the scene, one must first examine the value of the witches both in the scene and their representation and role during Shakespeare’s time. Medieval witch trials were notorious for burning women at the stake who they condemned of “witchcraft” and “heresy” based on various factors ranging from having a loud, boisterous personality like that of Anne Boleyn or because of mental disorders which could not otherwise be explained. One of the prominent reasons for burning women and accusing them of witchcraft, however, had little to do with practicing pagan rituals, and much more to do with the way they handled religious ideology. Scholar Richard Kieckhefer provides the insight that, “the relationship between the holy and unholy has long been familiar not only in literary but in historical and anthropological circles [where] sainthood and witchcraft are often seen as mirror images of each other” (Kieckhefer 310). It was not uncommon for medieval nuns such as St.
Catherine of Siena and Hildegard von Bingen to claim that they would see visions, a concept that was dangerous for their time because of the accusations of witchcraft that would be apt to follow, such as the visions of Magdalena Beutler, who’s “holy, blessed life was scoffed at and denied... and it was often taken as a sign that she was a sorceress” (314). While the visions of these women seldom claimed to have satanic value, they were often seen as such because their radical ideas would come across as heretical and against God’s way, deeming these types of women as blasphemers. Some were considered to be possessed with evil spirits and would therefore be subjected to witchcraft by default, then burned in order to rid of the bad spirit.

Arguably the most destructive text of its time, the *Malleus Maleficarum* by Heinrich Kramer in 1487 “calls for the extermination of the sect of (female) witches, and claims that the devil takes advantage of women’s insatiable lust and inherent propensity to receive the influence of a disembodied spirit in order to harm Christian society” (Herzig 28). Goold uses the concept of possession and spirits throughout the film by displaying the witches in nun headdresses, representing the idea that visionary nuns were thought to be witches during Shakespeare’s and medieval time. By doing this, he shines light on the idea that the witches have control over fate because they have satanic-like possession over their “accursed” visions. He sets the tone for their power furthermore by making them nurses as well as nuns to show that they don’t just have control over the mental aspects of those to whom they attend, but they also have a very physical control based on their nurse-like power to save (or destroy) lives.

With the control of the witches established, the next aspect of examination relies on what they do with their power. The witches say themselves that their intent is to stir trouble, such as in the recurring line, “Double, double, toil and trouble” (4.1.10) which establishes the idea that they have double motives to “toil” with their visions. With their power over fate, they offer Macbeth a
small portion of this power, but instead of offering it to him as a whole, they instead offer him a temporary control. This idea can be best introduced by Goold’s use of vanishing point, which is where what the audience can see comes to an end, whether it’s the horizon or a wall, and what that means. In the film adaptation, Goold represents the idea of fate as enclosure, seen in the witches scene in Act 4 Scene 1. The vanishing points of the scene rest in the near background, as the witches are surrounded by plastic painters sheets in a confined space. Part of the vanishing points are placed next to the camera to obscure the view of the witches and their curses and to represent that the sheets hang all around them, encasing them within the room. In Shakespeare’s play, the witches in MacBeth represent the drift between fate and chance, when in their prophecy they proclaim, “Hail Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!” (1.3.48) to prophesy about Macbeth’s future. In saying this, the witches never specify time, only say “hereafter” which neither indicates imminence nor longevity, meaning that Macbeth was bound to become king regardless of his actions. However, in stating anything at all, the witches provoke the aforementioned trouble and prove their power over his fate; if Macbeth had no knowledge of his future, becoming king would never be more than chance in his eyes, it would have been bound to happen regardless of action. As soon as the witches made it known to him, it became *his* fate, something he knew would happen, and because of this he was given the control of time since the deed was inevitable, and it was up to him whether or not to wait or to take action.

By giving Macbeth control of the time of his fate, though not his fate itself, the sisters continue to represent the idea of fate versus controllable lifestyle in this scene. The curtains surround them, representing the narrow-minded nature of fate. The scene takes place within because with fate, the solution to their prophecy makes the story bound to turn out one way, no matter what. If chance were in play, the possibilities would be endless with no single action in
need of taking place in order to make the scene relevant; the blood-stained sheets would prove no use for the vanishing point if the possibility was limitless, but with one outcome promised, the sheets limit the outside possibilities from trickling in, just as the witches constrain the lifeless bodies in the scene from going out; their fate has been sealed, their life is ended, and they are trapped in the enclosure, there to remain until the witches move them elsewhere. The witches are in complete control of the fate of the characters, Macbeth included.

Light also plays a prevalent role in the undertaking of this scene and the witches power. As mentioned about the vanishing point, the sheets hanging in enclosed space as they attend to the lifeless bodies encased inside their plastic wrapping. The close proximity of the sheets in the scene that encase the witches and the bodies inside shows that fate leaves no room for extra possibility as it sets the lives of others into stone and assumes that what is bound to happen will happen no matter what. Here, the witches show their control over life and death as they loom like shadows over the dead bodies in the scene and the light obscures the view of the outside world. By keeping the witches enclosed within the plastic sheets, not only does it prevent inside light from escaping, it also refrains light from getting in. Light looms behind the plastic sheets which does a variety of things. First, it illuminates the blood on the sheets which represents the bloody nature of the play as whole and the witches control over the tangible aspects of light. Secondly, it refracts the outside force of light from seeping in, which makes the light that’s inside of their space act as the light that appears more viewable to the audience. Inside of the body bags appears to be some form of luminescence trying to appear out through the plastic sheets, but rather than this helping make the bodies more viewable, it has the opposite effect; light makes the things it illuminates less visible. In fact, it is the lack of light that makes details and objects more visible. For the witches, this is exactly what they want. Shadows cast upon their own bodies to make
their expressions and actions more prominent to the audience than all the surrounding light around them, which shows that the witches obscure the light in order to illuminate themselves. In the same way, the witches obscure Macbeth from the light in order to hide their true power over him. While Macbeth can view and see light all around him just as he knows that he became king through fate, the light fails to let him truly see anything beyond the walls he’s entrapped in, both literally and figuratively. Literally, since as Macbeth enters the scene in the film he appears encased behind bars and looms in shadows, and figuratively because the witches only give him the power to control the timing of when he would become king, but withholding the consequences of what could happen. Macbeth is trapped by the knowledge of his ability to become king because when the witches tell him about his fate he is granted the power to make it happen at once, or to wait until inevitable circumstances make it happen for him. In either case, he’s forced to chose what to do, and by choosing to wait the force of that choice has the possibility of weighing down on him for a long time and play on his doubts.

Macbeth’s temporary power over time is more about what he can see, of course. What he hears plays an important role in what the witches construe as well. Within Goold’s same scene
he does several interesting things with the sound as well as the light. First is the sound of the witches voices. On one hand, the sound and actions are similar to the sounds used in horror movies when a person is possessed, which would go along exactly with the idea of Renaissance witchcraft that signifies the visions and “prophecies” that the witches behold are demonic. This theory is supported by the way the witches behave in the scene, with their eyes rolling back in their heads, the jerky movements of their bodies, and the overall movements as if indicating they aren’t in exact control of their own bodies. On the other hand, the sound is similar to the noise that would come from a hospital intercom or something to that effect. In this scenario, the sound of their voices would further indicate their control of relaying messages, meaning that as replicas of fate it is their duty to pass on the visionary messages they receive for the benefit of others to hear. Goold represents their stance as visionary witches by tweaking their voices to sound this way for a time.

Perhaps a more important aspect of sound in this scene is the monotonous beeping noise, like that of a heart monitor that beeps at a steady speed. The sound in the scene plays important parts. First, it creates a tempo for the witch lyrics, which keeps them uniform in their pacing, especially in the lines that they speak altogether. Normally, in a song, the tempo of a piece is almost silent, kept by multiple beats in a stanza or the downward stroke of a chorister’s hand to keep the pace instead of an audible noise. However, the noise in Goold’s scene is kept loud and constant to mimic the idea of witches in Shakespeare’s time. As mentioned before, women were sometimes accused of witchcraft just because of their loud behavior. Anne Boleyn, a former queen of Shakespeare’s England and the mother of Queen Elizabeth herself, was accused of witchcraft because of the power she held over the king for a time. Anne was known for being opinionated, loud, and for having a sort of seductive power over King Henry VIII which made
her a prime victim of witchcraft accusations. Without their seduction of Macbeth, their loud and boisterous rhymes in the witch scene, and their ultimate control of all surrounding them, the characters of the play would continue to work through means of chance and not through the power of fate which the witches hold. The beeping monotony that keeps the tone shows the witches as the choristers of the “music,” as they prove themselves furthermore to be the driving factor of the plot of the play. Furthermore, this indicates that now that Macbeth has used his control over time to become king, he no longer possesses that power. The witches take back their power of time, and the beeping time of the heart rate monitor displays that time is ticking, and the inevitable fate of Macbeth’s demise still rests in their hands, just like the lifeless bodies of those around them. Ironically, none of the bodies in the scene appear to be living, so the ongoing sound of the heart rate machine indicates their control over a different heart than those of the dead bodies surrounding them; indeed, the heart of the tragic hero, Macbeth. The heart rate sound stops only when the witches announce, “By the pricking of my thumbs,/ Something wicked this way comes” (61-62) to show how they are obscuring Macbeth’s ultimate fate from him. They recognize that Macbeth’s time is over, and from his wicked actions, like the stopped sound of the heart monitor, Macbeth’s end too is nigh.

The musical tempo of the scene takes on more than just the role of the witches power, but sound and musical tone is also used as a representation of the lines that Goold takes out. In film, transposition is the use of sounds or visuals in order to recreate lines that have been taken out of the original play. In Goold’s version of Macbeth not only does he take out lines from the character of Hecate and “the other three witches” from the scene, he leaves out Hecate and the other three witches from his rendition of the play entirely, leaving the mischief and mayhem to the same three witches throughout the film. Although Goold dismisses her character for the film,
he does not entirely dismiss the aura of her character as a whole, nor what she represents. In Greek mythology, Hecate is considered the goddess of witchcraft and similar ideas such as necromancy, magic, entrance ways and lights. In most of her mythological depictions, she is associated with holding light and she is shown as having three bodies, circled around and looking outward. While she is considered to be the queen over witchcraft, Goold uses transposition in order to acknowledge her presence in various ways. In this scene, as soon as Hecate and her three other witches are signaled to enter, the scene ignites a loud, thunderous noise to encircle the room, like the loud boom of thunder despite that the entire film takes place well within a bunker and real thunder would have no way of entering. Still, Goold uses this in order to transpose the entrance of Hecate and to recognize her god-like presence within the scene without showing her. Zeus, the head of Greek gods, is also the god of thunder; what better way to represent her godlike arrival than by transposing it with the most powerful sound of all? Goold further recognizes her presence by making the scene music-like, which is what a direction between lines 43 and 44 calls for. Instead of inserting the musical type beats to the lines where Hecate and the other three witches speak, Goold offers it to the scene as a whole so that the sound can be transposed throughout to furthermore implicate Hecate’s power within the scene, even without her physical presence.

Even more than just the sound, Goold transposes the lines and presence of Shakespeare’s Hecate through visualizations. In Shakespeare’s play, the repeated lines taken out of Goold’s scene are, “Round, around, around, about, about,/ All ill come running in, all good keep out” (49-50 or 59-60) which is still shown through the actions of the witches, as they twirl in circles after the thunderous noise before facing toward Macbeth who waits outside. They allow his presence to enter because after murdering King Duncan he is no longer considered good, but
rather, as the witches say, “wicked.” Last, it’s clear in Goold’s firm usage of only three witches that he meant for Hecate to be represented by their trilogy. Just as Greek mythology often visually depicts Hecate as having three sides, the three witches represent her value as a whole, both in their trilogy and in the way they have ultimate power over the fate of others based on their witchcraft. They display their power over the dead by climbing on top of the dead bodies, making a motion as if to resuscitate them, then continuing on with their rhymes and schemes to prove they hold the same godlike power as that of their queen who has been removed from the play. By doing this, Goold reallocates the powers of Hecate into the witches in order to give them the ultimate control of fate and time so that they can take total authority over the power of the play. With the representation of three of them throughout the film, it’s very possible that Goold may have even meant for the witches to be the trilogy of Hecate herself, and not just a representation of her subjects, but of her trilogy that makes up the entirety of her as a goddess of witchcraft.

In 2010 when the film for Rupert Goold was released, critics agreed that Goold’s depiction showed that it was the witches who pulled the strings. However, unlike the bearded women and wrinkly descriptions Shakespeare initially provided, Goold uses women who are relatively attractive, albeit possessed. Scholars wisely argue that this was done in order to show how sexuality drives Macbeth to his demise, as the women in his life encourage his poor behavior and manipulate him into the course of his actions. Women in Shakespeare’s time were also sometimes accused of witchcraft based on their poor looks and beards, which is why in Shakespeare’s version of the play the witches were created to look ugly. One interpretation of the attractive witches in Goold’s scene could certainly have to do with their sexuality, but given their nun headdresses, their clothing that covers almost every inch of their body, and the plainness of
their attire I find it more likely that the beauty of the witches in Goold’s adaptation signified their control to allocate time. If the witches possessed the ultimate control over time throughout, this would also give them the power to control their age which would give them a more youthful appearance for as long as they desired. Goold appeared to use the witches as a means of trickery rather than seduction, and the assumption of their womanhood meaning they used their sexuality as a means of control would lose the emphasis on the nun costumes that create the dynamic that they were visionary, prophetic witches over sultry, enslaving women who use the power of their womanhood to manipulate Macbeth. For this reason, it’s clear that their youth signifies their control over fate and time more so than it means to express their manipulation through their gender.

Through examples of light, sound, and transposition, I’ve made it clear how the witches represent fate and give the power of time to Macbeth temporarily. Indeed, as Macbeth nears his end, he realizes that he’s lost his control over time and that he does not have ultimate control over his fate. When he comes to terms with his control, he realizes that once he has lost control over time, his fate no longer depends on the destiny of things, but rather on past actions. He says, “Time, thou anticipat’st my dread exploits” (4.1.160) to shows his awareness of how his control over time made him act in favor of quickness and how the witches knew his power over time would cause him to act rather than wait. He continues to prove such as he goes on to say, “The flighty purpose is never o’ertook/ Unless the deed go with it” (161-162) which proves his awareness of how his power made him act quick, and that his fate was never sealed to end well unless his motivations were good. His deed was done in bad spirit, therefore his impatience to become king could only end as well as the motivation that drove him to his fate. Since his power was used for selfish reasons and his impatience overtook his actions, the fate of his rule would
end poorly. For Macbeth, this afterthought would become his doom, as he realizes his power was constrained to what the witches gave him but the ultimate power of time would end after it’s met the quota. Macbeth’s prophesied destiny caused him to act quickly because of his thirst for power, but the result of the witches giving him this knowledge showed that they held the ultimate control of the timing in his downfall. Just as fate confines the limits of human lives, one must learn that even with knowledge and power, all things are temporary and the ultimate power lies in how we treat others and how others will reciprocate to make living more meaningful and long lasting.
Works Cited


