The Chalice and the Blade in Shakespeare's Macbeth

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Introduction

> FIRST WITCH
> When shall we three meet again?
> In thunder, lightning, or in rain?
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> SECOND WITCH
> When the hurly-burly's done,
> When the battle's lost and won.
> *Macbeth*
> I, 1, vv. 1-4

Macbeth is a tragedy in five acts probably composed by Shakespeare in 1606 and it appeared in print only in the 1623 *First Folio* posthumous collection[1]. While presenting the structure of the 'chronicle play'[2], *Macbeth* represents the drama of the human condition through the language of tragedy. Reversing the perspective between background and foreground, the historical dimension in *Macbeth* acts as a dramaturgical and narrative device that allows us to explore the complexity and multiplicity of the human soul related to its relationship with power and its expression, with nature and with alterity and diversity.

The peculiar language of *Macbeth* has the value of ~~basic~~ presenting a structural function and it is founded on the antithesis figure of speech: between beauty and ugliness, good and bad, light and shadow, sovereignty and tyranny, sacred and evil, heaven and hell. This antithetical structure is a constant element of the work and it provides the rhythm to the continuous dance between co-present rather than conflictual opposites. In this regard, the opening chorus of the Three Witches, "Fair is

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[1] For a critical analysis of the text, see: Lombardo, Agostino, 1983 (IV edizione; I edizione 1969), *Lettura del Macbeth*, Vicenza: Neri Pozza; Melchiori, Giorgio (a cura di), 2005 (I edizione 1976), *Teatro completo di William Shakespeare. Le tragedie*, I Meridiani, Volume IV, Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore.

[2] The main source of historical facts from which Shakespeare draws is the work *The Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* of Raphael Holinshend (1577; 1587). In this work is narrated the story of Macbeth who reigned in Scotland from 1040 to 1057, who killed his predecessor Duncan I and who was in turn killed by Duncan's son, Malcolm III.

foul, and foul is fair" (I, 1, v. 11), is the key to understanding the very essence of the tragedy, symbolizing the reversal of the apparent order that characterised the entire play. According to Coleridge, the first scene echoes the keynote of the entire drama.

The female protagonists, particularly the Three Witches and Lady Macbeth, can be considered the symbols of different representations of the feminine and of the relationship with power, with nature and with the cosmos. These figures represent two different models of social and cultural system that characterised the paradigm[3] developed by Riane Eisler. These are respectively the partnership/mutual model, symbolized by the Chalice, and the domination/dominator model, symbolized by the Blade. This is the interpretative and analytical key that guides this exploratory paper whose results will be illustrated in the following sections.

Love and Power in Shakespeare

The analysis of *Macbeth* in the light of the theoretical perspective elaborated by Eisler in *The Chalice and the Blade* raises questions and offers interesting insights on power. Indeed, together with love, power is an issue at the heart of Shakespeare's plays, as argued by Krippendorff. Specifically, the history plays and tragedies stage the "reproduction mechanisms of dominion" (Krippendorff 2005: 12) and they refer to an idea of order and of the exercise of power which coincide with a society based on a domination/dominator model (*sensu* Eisler)[4].

Sensitive observer of his time, Shakespeare shows the dangers of the exercise of power supported by violence and domination, and of the political action free from any tie with the community and from the pursuit of the common good.

Indeed, as pointed out by Krippendorff, the representation of power, and consequently of the socio-political dimension in Shakespeare's history plays and tragedies, revolves around specific themes that find in *Macbeth* a tragic and crude representation. Specifically, these themes are: the understanding of the order as dominion; the extreme individualism of the characters wielding power; the mutual distrust of the representatives of the political class and their rivalry for the conquest of power and hegemony; betrayal as the *leitmotif* of political action; war as a key element of the events narrated; the relationship between masculinity, craving for power and violence; the exclusion of women from society and the political sphere; the reduction of the legitimacy of power to socio-economic efficiency.

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[3] According to Riane Eisler's Cultural Transformation Theory, history is the result of the interaction between two evolutionary movements. The first is the tendency of social systems to develop from primitive to complex organizational forms through technological phase changes; the second is the movement of cultural shifts between two basic models for social and ideological organization: *androcracy* (domination) and *gylany* (partnership) (Mercanti 2011; 2014). Specifically, the Cultural Transformation Theory claims that underneath the apparent great differences of human culture there are two basic models of society. The dominator model, what is commonly referred to as patriarchal or matriarchal, is characterized by the dominance of one half of humanity over the other. The second model, the mutual one, is instead characterized by social relations that are based primarily on union and not on dominance, in which diversity means neither inferiority nor superiority.

[4] The domination/dominator model is the basis of a social system characterized by a high degree of fear, abuse and violence, essentially structured on rank as organizational principle (Mercanti 2011: 405).

According to Krippendorff, Shakespeare's plays focus on two major themes, love and power, that are the crucial aspects of existence which constitute the heart of ethical problems in human coexistence and that are often in deep antagonism between them.

In Shakespearian works, love is to be understood as affability (Krippendorf 1992: 17-18) and it is manifested through all those human values[5] which transcend differences of nationality, gender, religion and social class such as human solidarity, mutual understanding, willingness, faithfulness, reliability, selfless altruism, collaboration and cooperation, loyalty and trust. In line with what Eisler suggested, "in the partnership model, love is recognized as the highest expression of the evolution of life on our planet, as well as the universal unifying power" (Mercanti 2011: 403; 2014: 19).

Conversely, power in all its forms is located at the opposite pole as an expression of hierarchical order, glory and public recognition, public respect, ambition, courage and valour, individualism, authority, and detachment. In other terms, power represents all those qualities and values embodied by the characters of Shakespeare's history plays and tragedies. These are the values with whom the great personalities of history and politics are generally identified. Power, thus understood, together with dominion, are the guiding thread of history, as also noticed by Eisler.

As a corollary to the above and in accordance with Krippendorff, the issue of the legitimacy of power plays a critical role in Shakespeare's tragedy: according to the author, indeed, the only legitimate power is the one at the service of a higher order and it fits in a wider context, the cosmic one. Legitimate power, in this sense, becomes the foundation of the inspiring model of responsible and ethically justified political action. It becomes the ethical model of a society harmoniously ordered at a cooperative level and founded on the unanimous support of each individual. It is a society based on the cosmic order in which altruism is the compass of political ethics and represents the measure to legitimate government and political action in order to serve the common good.

In this sense, politics is for Shakespeare ethical action. It is a human activity which aims to carry out long-lasting systems through the achievement of ethical principles. Otherwise, it becomes destructive politics reduced to techniques of domination, and it is the kind of politics that is represented in history plays and tragedies.

Taking into consideration politics and the exercise of power through the analytical-interpretative framework of the partnership/domination *continuum*, it is possible to find significant similarities with the concept conveyed by Shakespeare. According to Eisler (2002), indeed, there are two variations of power highlighted by the partnership/domination *continuum*: one is attributable to a domination/dominator model in which power is understood as giving orders, controlling and rendering people powerless and incapable of acting (*disempowerment*); the other is attributable to a partnership model in which those who have a position of power use it to empower others enhancing autonomy and responsibility (*empowerment*).

Together with power, another central issue in *Macbeth* is evil. According to Knight, one of the most distinguished Shakespearian scholars, this tragedy can be considered "his deepest and most mature vision of evil" (Wilson Knight 1949: 141 *et seq*). Indeed, as pointed out by Krippendorff, evil is a

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[5] These are the mutual values that Eisler considers at the basis of the partnership model, namely those "social and cultural values that promote human development and well-being, such as empathy, nonviolence, caregiving, and mutual trust, presented as normal and desirable" (Mercanti 2011; 2014).

latent dimension which manifests itself in power structures based on violence, and it takes shape and reaches its peak in the regime of tyranny established by Macbeth.

Shakespeare leads the reader/viewer face to face with the evil inherent in the opportunistic craving for power, in the unbridled individualistic ambition and in dominion which are, in *Macbeth*, firstly the driving force of the thought and then of the criminal action of Macbeth and his wife. The ruthlessness and harshness of Macbeth and her Lady are narrated vividly and evocatively by Shakespeare through their monologues and dialogues, which assume the tone of the confessional because of their at times self-reflective nature. This ruthlessness and harshness accompany the reader in the dynamics and in the psychic meanders in which the genesis of evil is accomplished.

The character of Macbeth embodies and represents, in an exemplary way, this dark and 'evil' dimension of domination and craving for power. This starts with the prophecy of the "imperial theme" (I, 3, v. 129) enunciated by the Three Witches, the Weird Sisters, and towards which Macbeth, from the very beginning, was well willing to believe, even if it initially represents a source of doubt and inner turmoil. And it is precisely the "imperial theme" that progressively insinuates what triggers the impetus and the strong motivation to criminal thinking and action in Macbeth, leading him towards a downward spiral that reaches the point of no return with the murder of Banquo. The psychological, ethical and decision-making process which leads Macbeth to his crime and total dehumanization wavers between the initial sense of guilt for his evil and counter-nature thoughts and the uncertainty about the truth of the witches' prophecy, reaching the point where murder becomes an integral and central part of his political action. In this regard, what makes Macbeth such a tragic modern hero, responsible for his own destiny, it is his acting in full awareness. He is, indeed, aware of the wickedness inherent in the act that he is about to commit (the murder of King Duncan) rather than being subject to an ineluctable destiny that cannot be avoided. To reach power, Macbeth deliberately chooses the course of action to be followed, despite the consequences.

As stated by Krippendorff, the 'psychological' inner story of Macbeth is the story of a successful criminal on the political stage who tries in vain not to justify to himself his own evil act but to hide it, remove it and forget it (Krippendorff 2005: 259). Indeed, in order to live with the burden of the committed deed thanks to which has gained the power he had coveted, Macbeth must commit another crime: the murder of himself and his humanity. To be able to continue to live and coexist with the weight of his brutal act, Macbeth must become another man, other than himself, and kill those qualities that make him a human being (e.g., poetry, imagination, creativity, consciousness, human goodness). He must consciously carry out a process of physical, ethical and spiritual self-destruction. Shakespeare highlights the brutality and the progressive estrangement of Macbeth from the human dimension. In the tragedy, this estrangement is manifested through his silence and his cold detachment, and through his ruthless inhumanity

On a symbolic level, evil is present in the atmosphere filled with darkness that characterises the tragedy, where the sun rarely appears on the scene. Together with black, the red of blood is the other colour that stands out as chromatic *leitmotiv* of the entire play. It is present from the beginning in the words spoken by King Duncan who, at the sight of the bleeding Captain returning from the battlefield, asks: "What bloody man is that?" (I, 2, v.1). Blood, therefore, is a red thread that runs throughout the entire tragedy whose "images form a dense plot" (Lombardo 1983: 34).[6]

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[6] As Lombardo points out, the word 'blood' appears more than a hundred times in *Macbeth*, to a much greater extent than in Shakespeare's other plays and tragedies.

Another peculiar element of *Macbeth* is the eminently masculine nature of the society in which the events take place and of the dynamics of the struggle for power. The world staged by Shakespeare is a world made of men[7] in which the practice of violence, warlike courage, physical endurance on the battlefield, bloody struggle and the exertion of dominion are not only a guarantee of success in the conquest of power, but they are also praised and honoured as the highest virtues. These qualities refer to an extremely patriarchal conception of masculinity which is characteristic of the societies based on a dominator model as described by Eisler. It is a world where women are submissive to men; they play a marginal role in it and they are excluded from every position of power. The society represented in *Macbeth*, indeed, is a full-fledged "androcentric system in which social organization is characterized by male dominance and the subordination of women, and in which the polarization between genders, and by extension 'diversity', corresponds to the opposition between superiority and inferiority. In attributing a dominant role to man, the woman is marginalized and subdued allowing male chauvinist values to represent the norm" (Mercanti 2011: 403).

Nevertheless, the main female characters of the tragedy, Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff, embody two different expressions of the feminine, although they are both submissive to masculinity.

Lady Macduff, brutally murdered in the Fife Castle by hitmen of the tyrant Macbeth, is a character who manifests virtues totally foreign to the world in which she lives: the innocence of the heart, goodness and loyalty, the centrality of bonds based on love and care. Her words seem to confirm the existence of a different reality from the dominant one. The search for natural order, the longing for harmony and for the 'natural touch' (IV, 2, v. 9) are all qualities that characterise Lady Macduff.

The character of Lady Macduff is sharply opposed to that of Lady Macbeth, who stifles and denies her own femininity, who internalises a distorted and violent concept of masculinity and says cruel and inhuman words, such as: "I have given suck, and know. / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me; / I would while it was smiling in my face / Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums / And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you / Have done to this" (I, 7, vv. 54-59). It is an image of death that emerges from what are perhaps Lady Macbeth harshest and most violent words, which reveal "the exaltation of non-nature, the aspiration to *chaos* and destruction", as pointed out by Lombardo.

If Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff embody two different and antithetical representations of the feminine and of the values associated with it in the world of Macbeth, the comparison between the Three Witches, the Weird Sisters, and Lady Macbeth is even more interesting. In light of the partnership and domination models illustrated by Riane Eisler, the analysis of these figures, in fact, proves to be a harbinger of interesting reflections and it raises questions about the different forms of representation of the feminine, the expression of power and the relationship with it, with nature and with the cosmos, of which the Three Witches and Lady Macbeth are the symbols. In the following paragraphs, the characters of Lady Macbeth and of the Three Witches will be analysed respectively as a symbol of the power of the Blade, the first, and as a symbol of the power of the Chalice, the others.

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[7] Most of the characters in Macbeth are men, while women are only three (Lady Macbeth, Lady Macduff and the gentlewoman attendant on Lady Macbeth), excluding the three androgynous witches.

Lady Macbeth: The Power of the Blade

As a symbol of internalised patriarchy, Lady Macbeth can be considered an example of that femininwhich represses and denies her nature, her humanity and her ~~femininity~~ womanhood by totally submitting to the vision and values of the androcratic society in which she lives. Her words, thoughts and actions are inspired by the values and the worldview typical of the hierarchical-dominator system such as violence, force, domination, aggressiveness, conquest and submission, as described by Eisler. Lady Macbeth is a woman whose name we do not know, and she feeds her thirst for power through a total identification with an idealised view of the masculine that she would like her husband to embody, namely an idea of man adhering to the violent and aggressive stereotype of masculinity characteristic of androcratic systems.

For Lady Macbeth, the only obstacle to achieving the "imperial theme" is the 'real' nature of her husband. In Macbeth she sees, in fact, an innate tendency to good, a humanity and some form of ethical consciousness that could sabotage the unmentionable deed and destroy their dreams of greatness: "Yet I do fear thy nature / It is too full o'the milk of human kindness / To catch the nearest way" (I, 5, vv.15-17).

The existence of Lady Macbeth and her very reason for being are linked to the realisation of the ambitions of her husband Macbeth. Lady Macbeth is attracted to the power of the Blade, to an ideal of masculinity that coincides with violence, domination and usurpation: "What beast wasn't then / That made you break this enterprise to me? / When you durst do it, then you were a man" (I, 7, vv. 47-49). She despises the weak, she praises the fearless figures of the hero and the warrior and she considers evil as a lawful means to achieve one's goals and weakness as an obstacle to the realisation of one's ambitions.

Lady Macbeth denies her own feminine nature and she internalizes to a great extent the patriarchal system using her power in a distorted and unnatural way to bring death and destruction, rather than exercising her natural transformative, generative and creative power. In light of the partnership-domination paradigm, Lady Macbeth is the embodied symbol of 'power over', what Eisler calls 'the power to dominate'. This kind of power corresponds to the "coercive and lethal power of the Blade, the power to take away life instead of giving it, the fundamental power to establish and strengthen dominance" (Mercanti 2011: 410).

Lady Macbeth is the character who, in line with the vision and values of the dominator model typical of the society in which she lives, embraces a dichotomous view of reality (*either/or*) which expresses itself through an oppositional and binary logic. This view represents the pivotal principle of the relationship with the cosmos, with nature and with otherness and diversity, considered an enemy to fight by any means ('power against'), especially if the other is bearer of a different way of being and living.

The Weird Sisters: The Power of the Chalice

Far from being secondary characters, the Three Witches play a key role in the tragedy of *Macbeth*. They are, in fact, the driving force of the story and of the action of the protagonists, and they are those who weave the plot of the entire dramatic action with their prophetic words. Without the Three Witches and their prophecy there would be no story to tell. Guardians of a knowledge and a truth

alien to the world in which history unfolds, the Three Witches are beings able to unveil reality for what it is: a reality constantly shrouded in fog. From the beginning, they seem to provide the interpretative key of the whole tragedy, warning the reader/viewer that all that will take place is not what it seems, it is not what it appears to be.

It is precisely the verse of the opening scene, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (I, 1, v. 11) that encloses the sense of the tragedy. This verse is able to create the image and to evoke the atmosphere of an upside-down world characterised by disorder, *chaos* and by the reversal of values and natural order. The Three Witches live on the heath, on the margins of a world dominated by war and violence, which are maximum expressions of the dominant and patriarchal model, and they are the symbol of "feminine nature-instinct" (Riem Natale 2005: 9). They live in total connection with nature blending with its elements, "they vanish into the air" and their corporeity "melts as breath into the wind", they are like "earth bubbles" (I, 3). The Three Weird Sisters are elusive, indefinable, shapeshifters, androgynous beings that go beyond the classic conceptions of the male-female dichotomy. They represent an ancient and different order of a gylanic nature (Riem Natale 2005: 11), partnership-oriented and based on a vision of reality informed by the feminine principle, which is sacred.

The condition of marginality that characterises the Three Witches is an expression of their total estrangement from a world in which they do not belong and that makes them look 'weird' in the eyes of those who meet them. This is because they are not compliant with the norms and they are the symbol of that 'Otherness'[8] which represents a threat to the apparent order of the dominant patriarchal system, as witchcraft is.

Such as the Norns, the Moirai or the Parcae, the Three Witches are weird sisters, "imperfect speakers" (I, 3) who have the gift of prophecy and who are custodians of "more than mortal knowledge" (I, 5). The Weird Sisters are those who announce to Macbeth his tragic fate.

The Three Witches are guardians of the ancient spiritual ways focused on the sacred feminine; they are priestesses who honour and celebrate the Goddess who manifests herself through Nature, its elements and its cycles. The Weird Sisters know the art of magic and alchemical transformation whose focal element is the cauldron, the chalice of life, symbol of the womb and of creative power. The expression of the sacred dimension embodied by the Three Witches is the figure of Hecate, pre-Olympic, archaic and primordial Goddess. Hecate is the triune Goddess that holds the keys of the Mysteries of birth, death and rebirth and to which have been attributed, over the millennia, numerous epithets to describe her peculiar aspects and qualities[9]. These aspects and qualities are a manifestation of wealth as well as of the complexity of Hecate, whose triune shape also represents her power over the three realms that she governs: the sky, the sea and the earth.

As guide and guardian of crossroads, of boundaries and limits (both symbolic and physical), and as custodian of the desires and of human beings' will, Hecate is the liminal Goddess, dweller on the

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[8] For a full understanding of the concept of 'otherness' used in this paper, please refer to the entry 'Altro/a/Alterità' of the *Glossario mutuale*, curated by Stefano Mercanti, in Eisler, Riane. 2011. *Il calice e la spada. La civiltà della Grande Dea dal Neolitico a oggi*. Tradotto da Vincenzo Mingiardi. Forum: Udine.

[9] The main epithets attributed to Hecate that refer to her peculiar aspects and qualities are: Goddess of Earth (*Chtonia*); Torch-bearer (*dadouchos*); Goddess of the Ways (*enodia*); Key-bearer (*kleidouchos*); Goddess of Childbirth (*kourotrophus*); Light bringer (*phosphorus*); Guardian on the Threshold (*propylaia*); Saviour (*soteira*); Threefold (*triformis*); Goddess of the Crossroads (*trioditis*).

threshold, the *limen*, who leads the crucial moments of transition of existence and, as such, she is the symbol of transformation.

As it happened for witchcraft and the figure of the witch, Hecate too was demonised by the patriarchal-dominator system through a process of progressive reversal of her original value and understanding of her role. These have been concealed by interpretations which have discredited the

very essence of Hecate or which have reduced her multifaceted nature, often emphasising and demonising in an ideological way her darkest aspects.

According to the mutual partnership perspective, the Three Witches embody and are expression of the 'power within', what Eisler defines 'actualization power', namely "the power to nurture, support, create, and accomplish things together (power *with* and power *to*) appropriate for the partnership model, as opposed to the power to dominate, inflict pain, and destroy (power over) equated with power in the domination model" (Mercanti 2014: 3). The Three Witches create and accomplish things together in sisterhood, with nature, with the sacred forces of the cosmos. Witches' power is a creative power that transforms and includes, unites, integrates, embraces and welcomes multiplicity and diversity.

Conclusions

Macbeth is a timeless work that speaks directly to the soul and deals with topics of great interest and relevance. In this regard, *Macbeth* is perhaps the crudest and most brutal of Shakespeare's tragedies which stages the drama of the human condition. It is a tragedy whose expressive power and its narrative and dramatic tension stimulate, through evocation, the mechanism of identification, reflections and questions capable of indicating new interpretative and analytical perspectives, as well as future prospects for research.

The analysis and the interpretation illustrated in this short paper are focused mainly on the issue of power and its expression, on the different modes of representation of the feminine and its relationship with nature and cosmos in the light of the theoretical and analytical framework of the partnership-domination model developed by Eisler. In a comparative perspective, the analysis has focused on the main female protagonists of the tragedy, Lady Macbeth and the Three Witches which are, respectively, symbols of the domination and partnership model and of the different types of power that represent them.

As pointed out, far from being secondary characters of the tragedy, the Three Witches embody the real driving forces of the dramatic action. They weave the plot and the threads of the staged story and the action of the protagonists and the other characters. They are Weird Sisters, sisters of the fate, guardians of an archaic and forgotten knowledge which through their prophecies influence the thoughts and actions of the two protagonists, Macbeth and his wife, leading them towards the tragic conclusion.

The Three Witches represent an echo of the Otherness that turns out to be the truth. The Three Witches remind us that the real power is not that exercised over or against someone or something, of a separative nature, but the one capable of creating union, connection and integration within oneself, first of all, through acceptance and mastery of one's own inner contents, and then reverberate on the

outside. This is a power that implies qualities such as listening, awareness, acceptance and self-mastery and which is based on the ability to discern and to be heretical, that is to say to make choices in tune with one's own humanity, oriented to the common good while, at the same time, being true to one's own peculiar nature. This is the kind of power on which the *partnership* is grounded.

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