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**THE PORTRAYAL OF THE WITCHES IN *MACBETH*: A COMPARATIVE  
ANALYSIS OF THE WEIRD SISTERS IN THREE FILM ADAPTATIONS**

**FORTALEZA**

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Trabalho de conclusão de curso apresentado ao Curso de Letras Inglês do Departamento de Estudos da Língua Inglesa, suas Literaturas e Tradução da Universidade Federal do Ceará, como requisito parcial à obtenção do título de Licenciatura em Língua Inglesa.

Orientadora: Prof. Dra. Dolores Aronovich Agüero.

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## ABSTRACT

The present study has the purpose of developing a comparative analysis of the characters of the witches in the play *Macbeth*, written by William Shakespeare, and in three cinematic adaptations: Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971), Justin Kurzel's *Macbeth* (2015) and Joel Coen's *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (2021). Acknowledging the concepts related to the figure of the witch and the importance and influence of Literature to society, a significant example of the portrayal of witches can be found in *Macbeth*. The analysis focuses on the representation of the witches in society and in the play, and afterwards, in the comparison with each cinematic adaptation, examining the differences and similarities of the elements involved in the portrayal of these characters. Based on the analyses, one can see notable variations of the witches' depictions in the three films when compared to the play and to each other. All the three adaptations find new and successful alternatives to portray the Weird Sisters.

**Key words:** *Macbeth*; Shakespeare; Witches; Comparison; Film adaptation.

## RESUMO

O presente estudo tem o propósito de desenvolver uma análise comparativa dos personagens das bruxas na peça *Macbeth*, escrita por William Shakespeare, e em três adaptações filmicas: *Macbeth* (1971), de Roman Polanski, *Macbeth* (2015), de Justin Kurzel, e *A Tragédia de Macbeth* (2021), de Joel Coen. Reconhecendo os conceitos relacionados à figura da bruxa e a importância e influência da literatura na sociedade, um exemplo significativo da representação das bruxas pode ser encontrado em *Macbeth*. A análise foca na representação das bruxas na sociedade e na peça e, posteriormente, na comparação entre cada adaptação filmica, examinando as diferenças e similaridades dos elementos envolvidos na representação dessas personagens. Baseado nas análises, podemos ver variações notáveis nas representações das bruxas nos três filmes ao compará-las com a peça. Todas as três adaptações encontram novas e bem-sucedidas alternativas para representar as bruxas.

**Palavras-chave:** *Macbeth*; Shakespeare; Bruxas; Comparação; Adaptação filmica.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The image of the witch has been carved into people's minds for a long time, although Modern Western societies appear to have forgotten about their origins and they have become recurrent characters of fiction stories and a famous Halloween costume. In popular imagery, they are usually represented as old women with long noses, warts or scars on their faces, related to the unnatural and evil. However, since the beginning of human civilization, individuals identified as witches have assumed different roles within societies, each one yielding their own versions of myths and stories about them. From ancient priestesses of Antiquity to malevolent beings during the European Witch Hunt, they predominantly have been women who defied prevailing social constructs due to their perceived possession of excessive power.

As a significant means of both shaping and reflecting social influence, Literature has been portraying witches according to societal beliefs in a diversity of works throughout time. An instance of this portrayal can be found in the play *Macbeth*, written by William Shakespeare in the beginning of the 17th century, which has been adapted to the cinema numerous times. Although in the present days witches are usually associated with characters from books, movies and pop culture in general, being considered almost as mythological creatures as fairies or trolls, women have suffered and still suffer from this association. Thus, this undergraduate thesis aims to analyze the Weird Sisters, the witches in *Macbeth*, in comparison to three film adaptations in order to understand the changes and continuities made in these portrayals.

Taking into consideration the history of witches and that Literature is a powerful tool when it comes to influencing and reproducing social beliefs, the study aims to accomplish the following general objectives: (i) Conduct a comprehensive analysis of the witches in the play *Macbeth* and in three different film adaptations, with the goal of exploring and discussing the depiction of witches in each work; (ii) Examine the portrayal choices made for the Weird Sisters in the adaptations in comparison with the original play. In order to attain the stated goals, the specific objectives mentioned next outline the necessary steps: (i) Read and analyze the play *Macbeth*, focusing on the appearances of the witches; (ii) Assess the three film adaptations, giving special attention to the manner in which each movie chooses to represent



the witches; (iii) Compare thoroughly the play *Macbeth* with each film adaptation, and further, the adaptations among themselves, specially the scenes in which the witches appear, for the purpose of finding differences and similarities in their portrayals.

The work will analyze the witches in three film adaptations: *Macbeth* (US/UK, 1971, directed by Roman Polanski); *Macbeth* (UK, 2015, directed by Justin Kurzel) and *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (US, 2021, directed by Joel Coen).

The play *Macbeth* was written by William Shakespeare in about 1606 or 1607 and first published in the Folio in 1623. Pursuing Shakespeare's usual play structure, it has five Acts and it is the playwright's shortest tragedy. In the Theatre some believe that saying its name out loud may carry bad luck. To overcome the "curse", *Macbeth* is also called "The Scottish Play". The story follows Macbeth, a general in 11th-century Scotland that, after being told by three witches a prophecy that he would become King, plots and murders Duncan, the King of Scotland. After succeeding to the throne, he has to handle the consequences of this act. Regarding the adaptations, the three analyzed films maintain a high degree of fidelity to the original work. Most of the key elements of the plot, characters and themes were preserved. I intend to dive into both the literary work and cinematographic interpretations along the thesis.

The body of this study consists of two major parts. The first main part is divided into two sections. The first section is the Literature Review, which focuses on exploring the historical context of witchcraft and the portrayal of witches in society, especially in Europe. The second part analyzes the witches in the original work, focusing on their characterization and role in the plot, examining the imagery and language associated with them and discussing Shakespeare's influences to build these characters. The second major part is divided into four sections, in which I will conduct an analysis of each film adaptation, prioritizing the scenes in which the three witches appear and compare the film's interpretation to the play, and also conduct a comparative analysis of the three adaptations, in which they will be compared to one another, regarding the differences and similarities in the adaptations' choices.

## 2. WITCHES IN SOCIETY AND IN THE PLAY *MACBETH*

### 2.1 Literature Review

For the purpose of enhancing this research, the books *A História da Bruxaria* (RUSSELL; BROOKS, 2019) and *Witches, Witchhunting and Women* (FEDERICI, 2018) provide a detailed analysis of witches in society. Furthermore, the theses *Weird Sisters and Wild Women* (LAWLESS, 1999), *Strange Images of Death: Violence and the Uncanny in Five Productions of Macbeth* (AGUERO, 2009), *Macbeth e a representação do herói trágico shakespeariano no cinema* (RIBEIRO, 2022), the book *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Tragedies* (DILLON, 2007) and the article *As várias faces da feiticeira: Uma análise mítica da bruxa na peça Macbeth por Shakespeare e na adaptação filmica de Welles* (PEREIRA; FARIAS, 2017) will be utilized primarily on the analysis of the witches in the play of *Macbeth*, as well as in the film adaptations.

Witches, or more precisely, the social concept attributed to the term, has been prevalent since ancient times across various parts of the world. Historically, people, mostly women, have always been acknowledged for the conduction of rituals involving healing or protecting practices, for instance. Nevertheless, the ideas conveyed to the word have departed from the initial assumptions with the passage of time, transitioning the image of the witch to maleficent beings. In current Western societies, the belief in the existence of witches is not shared by average citizens, but they are still present in cultural imagery: “Even though the Witch is no longer taken seriously, she survives for children, for fun, and as the symbol of a credulous, superstitious past” (LAWLESS, 1999).

The term *witch*, as explained in *A História da Bruxaria* (RUSSEL; BROOKS, 2019), derives from the Old English words *wicca* and *wicce*, referring respectively to a male and female practitioner of witchcraft. Both of the words originate from the verb *wiccian*, meaning to “cast a spell”. Among numerous interpretations tied to the term, two stand out for this study: the diabolical witch and the ordinary woman behind the archetype. If the concept can already be found in early societies of ancient times, the etymology of the word demonstrates the major modifications on the perception of witches, consolidating its image as it is known in the contemporary era.

Such major changes occurred mainly due to the witch hunts that reached its peak in the Modern period, during the 16th to the 18th century. The witch hunts in Europe produced a significant historical transition accountable for the trials and executions of thousands of people, which later propagated to the North American continent. Thus, this period is essential to understand the evolving concepts of the witch and witchcraft. It also provides context to comprehend the witches' characterization in Shakespeare's play.

To Russel and Brooks (2019), there was a gradual introduction to the known concept of witchcraft, not fully formed before the 15th century. The shift point occurred with Christian convictions' regarding pagan practices, deeming everything outside of Christianity, including other religions and sorcerers, a Satan's plan to deter the world's salvation. This belief contributed to the interpolation and eventually the evolving of sorcery to witchcraft, as these antique practices became connected to the Devil.

Additionally, Federici (2018) argues that there is a connection between witch hunts and the major changes that Europe was facing. According to the author, the implementation of capitalism in the continent was a factor that influenced the witch hunts. In this way, events such as the land enclosures in England, the growth of agrarian capitalism in continental Europe, and increased taxation provided a social context that contributed to the rise of witchcraft accusations. Federici (2018, p. 17) notes that witch hunting emerged in communities "where impoverishment and rising inequalities were rampant". The process of land privatization instigated significant transformations in both social and economic relations, expelling a considerable portion of the population that relied on common lands for their survival.

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, in many European countries, associations to witchcraft included nightly excursions, participation in *sabbaths* (witches' gatherings), orgies, cannibalism, infanticide, formal renunciation of Christianity and the pact with the Devil (RUSSEL; BROOKS, 2019). The latter two indicate the intention of the witch to engage in the acts, willingly surrendering her soul to Satan. However, the convictions surrounding witchcraft in England diverged significantly. Russel and Brooks (2019) posit that English witchcraft emerged later than in the other countries and remained distant from the belief in the cult of the Devil and close to sorcery. The witches' power layed in casting curses or bewitching, that is, making small acts of malevolence. In the continent, witchcraft was a

crime against religion, while in England it was a civil offense.

In Europe, crimes once categorized as heresy, a longstanding transgression against the Church, slowly evolved into witchcraft accusations. Before the defendant faced the trial, which could be either ecclesiastical or secular, she went through sessions of torture to confess her crimes. In continental Europe, witches would be burned alive and in England, hanged. Women, many of them who were in precarious social and economical conditions, were the most affected, as stated by Federici (2018, p. 19): “The ‘witch’ was a woman of ‘ill repute’, who in her youth had engaged in ‘lewd’, ‘promiscuous’ behavior”. Some of the practices believed to occur are exemplified in the following painting made by Salvator Rosa:

Figure 1: *Witches at their Incantations* (Salvator Rosa, 1646)



Source: Rosa, Salvator. The National Gallery, online.

The Italian painter’s work is a depiction of the widely spread views on witches' gatherings, the *sabbaths*. The painting portrays witches and wizards with magical tools performing various wicked acts and famous artifacts associated with witchcraft, such as the cauldron and the broomstick. Representation of witches, as the one above, and instructional works on how to recognize them gained notoriety. The book *Malleus Maleficarum*, written by Heinrich Kramer and published in 1486, became an influential symbol of methods for identifying a witch (RUSSEL; BROOKS, 2019). After 200 hundred years, witchcraft accusations declined in Europe at the end of the 1600s.

## 2.2 The Witches in Shakespeare’s play

The story of the play revolves around Macbeth, Thane of Glamis and a Scottish army commander, who receives a prophecy from three witches that he will become Thane of

Cawdor and eventually the king of Scotland. Upon the unexpected fulfillment of the first part of the prophecy, Macbeth and his wife, Lady Macbeth, plan the murder of King Duncan so Macbeth can become king. The unfoldings of this act form the central plot of the play. Macbeth changes into a mistrustful person consumed by guilt. After Duncan's death, although he does not directly murder, Macbeth is responsible for many other deaths, the most cruel being that of Macduff's whole family.

The witches are the first characters to appear in *Macbeth*, introduced in the original English version without a specific setting, but amongst "Thunder and Lightning" (SHAKESPEARE, 2013, p. 7), in the first scene of Act I. Despite that, the witches' scenes are composed in a highly particular manner. They always appear in isolated places near nature and accompanied by thunder or lightning. This contributes to the creation of a dark and mysterious atmosphere and highlights their connection with natural forces. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Tragedies*, Dillon (2007, p. 115) discusses the initial scene:

The opening scene of *Macbeth* is totally unlike the increasingly realistic openings that have marked the tragedies immediately preceding it, which typically open in mid-conversation. [...] With its thunder and lightning and its three witches speaking in riddling rhyme, *Macbeth* clearly marks a new departure and visibly sets out to depict a world apart from the very human worlds that have dominated *Othello* and *King Lear*.

Afterwards, the witches appear three more times: in scene three of Act I; scene five of Act III and in scene one of Act IV (all of which will be described below). Their names, in case they have it, are never revealed. They are called First Witch, Second Witch and Third Witch, or the Weird Sisters in the Character List and by Macbeth. Lawless (1999) asserts that *Macbeth's* witches mark the establishment of the character of the witch in English literature.

In their initial appearance, the witches are plotting their next encounter, which will be with Macbeth. The character is mentioned by the Weird Sisters even before he appears in the play. They are aware of their existence and exactly where and when to meet him. This is evident in the lines:

SECOND WITCH: When the hurly-burly's done,  
When the battle's lost and won" (SHAKESPEARE, 2013, p. 7)

This early revelation suggests that these women possibly know the outcomes of the battle and possess an alignment with the supernatural. Before leaving, they allude to their familiars "Graymalkin", a cat, and "Paddock", a toad. The belief that witches were

accompanied, assisted or that could even turn into animals was popular during Shakespeare's time.

The witches' reunion, while waiting for Macbeth, also reinforces their connection to the supernatural and the idea that they hold some sort of power. The Weird Sisters cast a curse upon a sailor, the husband of a woman who refused to give the First Witch chestnuts. The Tiger, the ship carrying the sailor, is destined to wander in the sea.

Pereira and Farias (2017) posit that the witches in *Macbeth* personify common sense. They are portrayed as wicked characters who enjoy playing with people's destinies. Drawing parallels, Russel and Brooks (2019) contend that, in the beginning of the 1590s, James VI of Scotland was involved in a similar event. A group of witches faced trial, accused of cursing the ship in which the king embarked on a trip to Denmark. This suggests that Shakespeare was highly influenced by his time, using real life examples in his portrayal of the witches.

The witches' first encounter with Macbeth occurs in a heath. He appears in the scene alongside Banquo, the other army commander. Banquo is the one who first notices the Weird Sisters:

BANQUO: 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? [...] (SHAKESPEARE, 2013, p.17)

He also makes remarks on the way that they look. While he does not give many details, he portrays them as peculiar figures:

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" (SHAKESPEARE, 2013, p. 17)

From their first contact with other characters, the witches are portrayed as unusual beings that challenge societal expectations. This is evident in their gender-defying appearance, which opposes traditional notions of beauty and femininity. Their representation in the play influenced the formation of the popular image of the witch, as elucidated earlier by Lawless (1999): "the Witch as a literary character is established as a ragged, warty, ugly old woman, cackling with mischief and boiling up noisome potions in a cauldron, and it is to

*Macbeth* that we owe this picture”.

Moreover, Weird Sisters’ lack of adjustment clarified by Banquo aligns with Federici’s description of the witch: “She had often had children out of wedlock, and her demeanor contradicted the model of femininity that through the law, the pulpit and the reorganization of the family was imposed on the female population of Europe during this period” (FEDERICI, 2018, p. 19). This offers an alternative perspective on the impression of witches. Rather than being evil, they actually challenge and liberate themselves from conventional gender roles.

The witches greet Macbeth and Banquo, uttering the prophecies. Firstly, they declare Macbeth as Thane of Cawdor and then, as King of Scotland. The prophecy directed to Banquo differs from Macbeth’s: his sons will be kings, although Banquo himself will not. Following that, the witches disappear, or as indicated posteriorly by Macbeth in a letter, vanish. “When I burned in desire to question them further, they made themselves air, into which they vanished” (SHAKESPEARE, 2013, p. 31). Macbeth initially doubts the witches, but after they exit, two Scottish nobles confirm that he is the new Thane of Cawdor, fulfilling the first part of the prophecy. Dillon (2007) claims that it is not explicit that the witches are responsible for Duncan’s death and that the last part of the prophecy only reinforces thoughts that already existed in Macbeth’s mind, as he “hears the witches say exactly what he wants to believe” (AGUERO, 2009, p. 41). However, Pereira and Farias (2017) argue that they actively shape the protagonist's destiny through their incantations.

The Weird Sisters’ subsequent appearance takes a while to unfold. They are only mentioned in Macbeth and Banquo’s conversation, where they are referred to as ‘things’ and ‘devil’. Additionally, in the letter from Macbeth to his wife, Lady Macbeth, they are described as having “more in them than mortal knowledge” (SHAKESPEARE, 2013, p. 31), reinforcing the idea that the characters in the play also perceive the witches as connected to the evil and the supernatural. In their third entrance, the witches evoke the Greek goddess Hecate, a character associated with witches and magical practices. Hecate appears to be displeased with the witches and foresees the decline of Macbeth. In her only line in the scene, she says:

HECATE: Saucy and overbold, how did you dare  
To trade and traffic with Macbeth

In riddles and affairs of death, And I, the mistress of your charms, The close contriver of all harms, Was never called to bear my part Or show the glory of our art? (SHAKESPEARE, 2013, p. 111).

In this part, Hecate presents herself as the entity that the witches follow, and it can be inferred that the powers that they might hold are granted by Hecate or even that she is the one who is responsible for accomplishing the sisters' acts. This concept is supported by Pereira and Farias (2017), who assert that Hecate represents the will of the gods and the witches serve as mere instruments to fulfill the divine intentions. Also, Pereira and Farias (2017) explore the association of the witches with Hecate and mythological entities such as the Greek Fates (deities that control human destiny and weave the tapestry of fate) and the Norse Norns (female entities responsible for the destiny of humans), related with fate and the symbolic significance of the number three. Hecate is usually represented as a triple goddess, the same number of Fates, Norns and witches in *Macbeth*. These entities are responsible for controlling destiny, a role similar to the Weird Sisters'.

The witches' final appearance in the play begins with them chanting a spell around a cauldron. Hecate is also present in the scene. Macbeth enters and demands the witches to give answers to his doubts. The Weird Sisters summon their masters and the apparitions warn Macbeth that he should beware of Macduff. He is told that he cannot be defeated by a man born of a woman and not until Birnam Wood marches to Dunsinane. After that, The witches show Macbeth a procession of kings, with Banquo's ghost following them. The witches dance to music and vanish. Later, Macbeth's reliance on these confusing prophecies contributes to his eventual downfall.

In summary, the witches in *Macbeth* can be interpreted in diverse points of view. Their existence is shaped by a combination of different convictions, as Lawless (1999) remarks: "they are constructed from sometimes uneasy mixtures of popular, scholarly and classical versions of witchcraft". Simultaneously, they contributed to shaping the prevalent perception of witches. Their role in the play, as well as in which extent they influence Macbeth, can result in different insights. The play was written during an era marked by prevalent beliefs in witches as mystical and malevolent entities, contributing to persecution of individuals accused of practicing witchcraft. Shakespeare portrayed these beliefs in his work. However, centuries after the play was first published, there is room for new interpretations of the Three Witches, including one in which they are not inherently malevolent beings, but



powerful and autonomous women.

### 3. THE WITCHES IN FILM ADAPTATIONS

With the framework placed in the last section, it is possible to explore the dynamic between Shakespeare's original text of *Macbeth* (which will be referred to as the *playtext*) and its cinematic adaptations. Through a gradational analysis, the means in which the directors choose to translate the play into the screen, as well as how the adaptations align and differ from the original work, will be approached.

#### 3.1 Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* (US/UK, 1971)

In the 1971 adaptation of *Macbeth*, directed by Roman Polanski, we have the oldest of the three adaptations chosen for this comparative analysis. It is also the longest, with a duration of 2 hours and 20 minutes. The Weird Sisters are interpreted by the actresses Maisie MacFarquhar, Noelle Rimmington and Elsie Taylor. Macbeth is interpreted by Jon Finch, and Lady Macbeth, by Francesca Annis. Overall, concerning the story's plot, including the unfolding of events, characters, and ambiance, Polanski's work maintains a high level of fidelity. This reliability extends to the other two film adaptations that will be further analyzed.

Nevertheless, Pereira and Farias (2017) underscore that cinema is not a mere transposition of media; instead, it transforms what has already been established. The process of constructing and deconstructing cinema in order to create new works results in distinctive stories.

In Polanski's adaptation, much like in the play, the witches are the first characters to appear. However, as the stage directions in the playtext do not mention specific settings for their scenes, each adaptation must make these decisions. Before their entrance, the film begins with a depiction of the sky changing colors on a desert beach. When the sky is gray and cloudy, the three witches appear in frame, bringing aside a small cart. Their appearance is an aspect that draws attention: they have different ages; one is considerably younger than the other two, and even between the older witches, there is a noticeable age gap, as if they represent three generations of witches. They dress in simple clothes and the oldest have their hair covered. The oldest witch is blind and carries a walking stick.

One possible explanation for the choice of depicting the Weird Sisters as women in three different stages of life is the correlation to the goddess Hecate. Besides her association with witches and witchcraft, Hecate, in accordance with Pereira and Farias (2017), is commonly represented as a young woman (Maiden), a middle-aged woman (Mother) and an elderly woman (Crone).

Figure 2: Witches in the opening scene of *Macbeth* (Roman Polanski, 1971)



Source: IMDB

In Polanski's film, the oldest draws a circle with the stick as the other two cave in the sand. They proceed to make what seems to be an incantation. Where the circle has been drawn, the witches start casting strange and even macabre artifacts: a rope with a knot, a human arm and a dagger, while sprinkling some leaves and powder over it. Additionally, they spill blood and spit on the sand, concluding the incantation. The dagger is a significant object throughout the story, since in the original playtext and in the adaptations, Duncan is murdered with one, and Macbeth has a vision of a dagger “standing” before him later on. This early introduction of the object in the movie can relate the Weird Sisters with fate or with their influence over Macbeth's decisions, mainly due to the fact that the dagger was placed by the witches carefully above the hand, as if they are the ones responsible for performing the action.

From the first contact, their image as maleficent or, at minimum, unconventional beings is settled, by both their appearance and their acts, as they are portrayed casting a dreadful spell. The text is close to the original, with slight omissions and changes in order. Their first uttered words are the last of the first scene in the playtext:

ALL: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair, Hover through the fog and filthy air"  
(SHAKESPEARE, 2013, p. 7)

Then, the two older witches discuss the future encounter with Macbeth. As in the playtext, they appear to pursue greater knowledge, knowing where and when the event will happen, and perhaps, even the outcome. They slowly move away from the camera, walking down the beach in different directions (the oldest witch with the younger one and the other witch alone) and disappearing amongst the fog. The fog surrounds the witches in some of the scenes, contributing to the sense of ambiguity that they display. Its presence can be interpreted as their mysterious connection to nature and the elements, or even, as the witches' own creation, appearing and disappearing at their will.

The witches' next entrance takes place minutes later. Macbeth and Banquo are together when they hear women singing. As they get closer to the voices, amidst strong winds and fog, Banquo sees the oldest witch rubbing something on the youngest's naked back. Macbeth only sees the witches seconds afterward. Both seem more intrigued and confused at their vision of the women than afraid. The encounter reinforces the perception that they hold powers beyond comprehension, as it is Macbeth and Banquo who come across the witches, drawn by their singing, equivalent to sailors who are attracted by the sirens' chant, only to find their downfall. Their appearance is remarked by Banquo, as it is in the playtext. They are dressed in the exact same clothes of the previous scene, which portrays them either as non-changing entities or as socioeconomically marginalized women.

Subsequent to vocalizing the prophecies about Macbeth, the witches start to leave the place, accompanied by a goat (an animal commonly associated with witches and the Devil) as they speak to Banquo. Reflecting the playtext, the prophecies are possibly interpreted as the Weird Sisters' influence over Macbeth's destiny or an initial propulsion for him to follow his deepest desires. Macbeth follows the witches, trying to retrieve answers about the prophecies and the nature of the women, but they remain silent. The three enter through a door into an unknown construction. The youngest witch lifts her dress and sticks out her tongue at Macbeth before disappearing, outlining the peculiarity of their behavior. She does not utter a single word of the prophecies; her only line is in the beginning of the movie, when all the witches speak together. This suggests that she may be a sort of apprentice of the older witches. Unlike in the playtext, they do not vanish "into the air", indicating that, even if the witches have a connection with the supernatural, their origin is more natural in the adaptation.

After this meeting, the Weird Sisters are absent from the screen for a considerable amount of time, only being mentioned by Banquo.

Hecate is not represented in Polanski's adaptation, thus, the witches' meetings with the goddess are not shown in the movie. The Weird Sisters' next appearance portrays their second and last encounter with Macbeth. Early in the morning, Macbeth leaves the castle to meet the witches. Upon returning to the same place where he first saw them, he follows smoke and is pushed inside by a witch to the mysterious construction where the Weird Sisters hid before. He finds not only the Weird Sisters, but numerous other women. What he meets is similar to a *sabbath*, a witches' gathering. As Russel and Brooks (2019) state, it was believed that the witches would reunite in secret places to perform malevolent acts and practice "acts of libertinage" with the Devil or among themselves. This similarity suggests a reason why, in the scene, the witches are all unclothed. Many of them are older, have warts on their faces and unkempt hair.

This illustrates that the Weird Sisters are not alone and participate in a coven, expressing the idea of who the witches were and how they might appear during these gatherings, depicting an image that has been widely propagated. At the same time, it brings the human factor to the witches, approximating them even further to women who possess knowledge and supernatural abilities that allow them to disrupt established power structures. The witches' in Polanski's adaptation consistently inhabit the threshold between the supernatural and human nature.

As the eldest Weird Sister stirs the cauldron, the witches proceed to recite a spell, tossing ingredients such as a dead toad into the cauldron. The spell is reminiscent of the one that unfolds on the first scene of Act 4 of the playtext, which portrays the witches' last encounter with Macbeth. Macbeth demands to know the answers to his questions, so the witches give him a cup containing the liquid from the cauldron, and the apparitions are revealed. This scene differs from the playtext in that, in the text, it is more direct, while in the adaptation there is a longer sequence of visions that rapidly interlace each other, including Banquo's ghost and a boy sitting on the throne, which represents his lineage of kings. The same dubious prophecies from the playtext are given to Macbeth and the scene ends with him waking up in the same place, but the witches are gone. The prophecies provided by the witches' masters are tricky, and, as a result, Macbeth perceives himself as invincible.

As Aguero (2009) says, Polanski's film is a product of its time, the early 1970s. One scholar points out that “Macbeth's visions in the witches’ coven in Polanski’s film resemble an acid or LSD trip” (REYNOLDS, 2002, p. 157 *apud* AGUERO, 2009, p. 160). Once again, the discussion centers on the witches' abilities and the extent to which they influence Macbeth. Considering Macbeth's visions as authentic, it is suggested that, at the very least, the witches created the substance that induced these hallucinations, leading him to believe this invincibility, and eventually to his ruin. The ambiguity portrayed by the witches throughout the movie establishes the perspective that, despite engaging in supernatural acts, their origin is earthly. They are women who have found an alternative path to having some sort of very limited power, when conventional ways seemed inaccessible to them.

Polanski’s movie ends with one of King Duncan’s sons, Donalbain, hearing the chant of the Weird Sisters and going after them. Although this scene does not exist in the playtext it gives a sense of cyclical continuity, leading to the belief that the witches will continue to perform their mysterious acts. Moreover, Polanski's addition of this scene suggests that Donalbain might hear new prophecies from the witches and may be influenced to try to usurp his brother's throne, ending the order that has been reestablished with Macbeth’s death and Malcolm's crowning. In closing, Polanski’s Weird Sisters are a product of balance between the supernatural, since the movie reproduces many famous assumptions about witches, and the representation of outcast women of that time, as their human nature is an outstanding feature as well.

### **3.2 Justin Kurzel’s *Macbeth* (UK, 2015)**

In Justin Kurzel’s adaptation, made in 2015, Macbeth is interpreted by Michael Fassbender, and Lady Macbeth by Marion Cotillard. The actresses that interpret the Weird Sisters are Lynn Kennedy, Seylan Baxter and Kayla Fallon. The movie has a duration of 1 hour and 53 minutes.

The movie establishes its tone as dark and dramatic from the beginning: Macbeth, Lady Macbeth and a small group of people are all dressed in dark clothes, veiling the body of their child. In the playtext, there is a reference to Lady Macbeth having had a child at some point. This is a notable modification from the playtext, as the witches only appear moments

later, making their entrance after Macbeth is presented, changing the conventional sequence of events.

The witches are first introduced in a long shot, with mountains as scenery, observing the burying from afar. The whole scene is enveloped, not by sounds of nature, but by the dramatic background music, present since the opening scene. The camera focuses on their faces, as they deliberate their upcoming meeting with Macbeth, which will be on the battlefield. The witches are dressed in black dresses and have their hair braided. Their appearance is closer to that of conventional women, apart from the scars on their faces, especially one that they all have, in the middle of their foreheads. Russel and Brooks (2019) mention that witches were assumed to present spots on their bodies, scars, for instance, marked by the Devil. This is a potential explanation for the peculiar marks present on the witches' forehead, approximating them to the obscure and mystic.

Figure 3: One of the witches of *Macbeth* (Justin Kurzel, 2015)



Source: FILMGRAB

In this first moment, it is remarkable that they are not alone: one of the witches is accompanied by a little girl, as the other holds a baby. There are some possible interpretations to the inclusion of the children in the film. Lawless (1999) posits that “the popular discourse placed witchcraft squarely in the domestic, and therefore female, area”, hence, linking witches to children was well disseminated, despite the association having a negative foundation. The girl has the same scar as the witches, indicating that she is their young apprentice. Additionally, one of the profane actions that were considered to happen in witches' gatherings included the murder and sacrifice of babies (RUSSEL; BROOKS, 2019). The baby in their possession may be a reference to this conviction. Also, the presence of the children can be used to portray the contrast between the witches and the mothers and housewives that these women would have been expected to be. Lawless (1999) also

introduces the idea of the witch as a “mother gone bad”, who uses their powers for evil instead of good.

However, the most probable reason for why the witches have a baby and a little girl with them is because, according to Ribeiro (2022), Kurzel's film is replete with children, from the beginning to the end, in contrast to Macbeth and his wife, who do not have any. In order to reference the impact of this lack, the royal couple are accompanied by visions of children throughout the film, so it makes sense that the witches also have them.

Figure 4: The witches with the girl and the baby in *Macbeth* (Justin Kurzel, 2015)



Source: FILMGRAB

The witches are briefly introduced in the film; their first appearance resembles a bad omen. The change in the order of their introduction does not exclude their portrayal as agents who influence Macbeth's destiny or as beings that pursue enhanced knowledge, since they are aware of events that will further unfold.

The changing to battlefield as setting for the meeting contributes to the dramatic tone that Kurzel's adaptation builds, and to the construction of the witches as unnatural entities. They appear to Macbeth in the middle of the battle with only the little girl. However, he is the only one there who seems to notice their presence, since no one else looks at them, and they are left unharmed in an ocean of swords. They disappear in seconds, resembling the playtext, in which they vanish in front of Macbeth. He sees what appears to be either a vision of the witches (implying that they have summoned this apparition), or they were actually in the battlefield, selectly visible to Macbeth, and have the power to vanish. Both interpretations contribute to the belief of their abnormal origin.

The first direct interaction with the Weird Sisters occurs after the battle. Macbeth and Banquo come across them as they collect the blood from a dead soldier. Macbeth is the one who first speaks to them, not Banquo. The girl, followed by the witches, gets closer to them, but only two of the witches recite the prophecies. The words told by the witches are calmly pronounced, in opposition to their meaning for the plot. One of the witches holds Macbeth's head as she speaks, and he has a vision of himself being crowned king. This vision could have either been implanted by the Weird Sisters or, becoming king is something that he has already envisioned alone, and the witches only potentialized his ambition. Macbeth follows the witches, begging for explanations, but, once more, they vanish among the fog. Although the screen text is more freely adapted, the origin of Kurzel's witches is closer to the one in the playtext. Their ambiguity is still present, but it rests mostly in what they say and do (in their prophecies and vanishing) and not so much in their origin.

The witches are mentioned in some parts of the movie, but the little girl is the only figure associated with them that appears on screen in a long time. When Fleance, Banquo's son, escapes Macbeth's ambush, he is capable of seeing the girl in the forest. Her presence functions as a reminder of the influence that the Weird Sisters may have in Macbeth's actions, even after Duncan's murder. It may also be connected with the expanded knowledge that they pursue, familiarized with the consequences of Macbeth's conducts. Besides, as an apprentice, she could have been observing the development of the other witches' prophecies.

The three witches reappear on screen in their second encounter with Macbeth. He departs to the field looking for them, and, differently from the playtext, demands the answers to his questions before he encounters the Weird Sisters. After he finishes speaking, they appear among a heavy fog, as if they were waiting for his call. Macbeth is always shown first, then the witches. Instead of actually encountering each other, they reveal themselves to Macbeth to tell the prophecies, which reinforces their supernatural origin and places them closer to a sort of oracle. These connections become more evident as the adaptation progresses. The fog is a recurrent element throughout the movie, although not only when the Weird Sisters appear. It serves to create the dramatic and mysterious atmosphere of the movie in general. For the witches' scenes, specifically, it is an aspect that adds to the portrayal of them vanishing in the air.

Macbeth meets the Weird Sisters around a bonfire, accompanied by the girl and the



baby. This is the only moment that they are portrayed making something resembling an incantation, which is the liquid that Macbeth is given in order to see the apparitions. One of the witches spills the blood that they collected in the battlefield into the substance, suggesting that they already knew it would be useful. Still, the making of the charm is not as notable as the playtext portrays, since there is neither a cauldron, nor the extensive list of grotesque ingredients mentioned by the Weird Sisters. Before he drinks it, the witches themselves tell Macbeth a part of the prophecies. The remaining ones are told by soldiers' apparitions. On the field, they walk through Macbeth prophesying the words that give the deceiving notion that he is invincible. When the apparitions fade, the witches had already disappeared, leaving Macbeth alone.

Towards the end of the movie, the witches appear twice more: to Lady Macbeth, and in the final confrontation between Macbeth and Macduff. In the playtext, nobody sees them other than Macbeth and Banquo. Yet, in the adaptation, Kurzel made the witches appear briefly to Lady Macbeth, when she is already found in total despair. As she is not in a stable state of mind, the realness of their presence is uncertain. The Sisters could have made their way into Lady Macbeth's thoughts, inducing her to have a vision or, if they actually can be spotted outside the castle, they are there to witness Lady Macbeth's unbearable suffering. The last time Macbeth sees the witches is before his death. They watch the duel until the end, reinforcing the conviction that they can select to whom they are visible. Although their origin might be outside the physical world, they are not essentially good or evil. Kurzel's witches are the oracles and spectators of Macbeth's downfall. When Macbeth is defeated, concluding their prophecies, they vanish.

### **3.3 Joel Coen's *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (US, 2021)**

*The Tragedy of Macbeth* is a 2021 film directed by Joel Coen, starring Denzel Washington as Macbeth, Frances McDormand as Lady Macbeth, and Kathryn Hunter as the Weird Sisters. It is the most recent and also the shortest from the adaptations analyzed in this study, with 1 hour and 45 minutes of duration.

Coen's *Macbeth* is shot in black and white, which instantly sets a different tone for the movie. With the absence of colors, the production transmits a mysterious and dramatic ambience, surrounding the scenes in an enigmatic atmosphere. Also, the black-and-white

world differentiates itself from reality, granting the possibility of future events to be extraordinary, without seeming unbelievable. The movie commences by introducing the witches through only their voices in a completely black screen. Before any character appears, it is possible to read the word “When” on the screen and the voice of a witch asking the same question that introduces them in the playtext:

FIRST WITCH: When shall we three meet again? (SHAKESPEARE, 2013, p. 7)

The witches plan the encounter with Macbeth without being revealed. The lines are very similar to the playtext. However, their appearance, as well as the place where they are set, is unknown. This creates a mysterious atmosphere around them from the beginning. The character of the Captain is introduced, walking to the castle to give news from the battlefield to King Duncan. He is hovered by three ravens, which, in this first moment, could be a reference to the three witches, observing the events related to Macbeth.

Another explanation is that the birds are the witches themselves, having the capacity to transform into animals. The witches, mainly in countries as Germany and England, were assumed to have familiars, animals that assisted in their wicked acts (RUSSELL; BROOKS, 2019). In some instances, the witches were also believed to be able to change into those animals. It is important to recall that the witches in the playtext have familiars. Although it is not explicit in the playtext that the witches could assume their form, it links them to the witches of the adaptation.

Only in their second entrance do the witches appear on screen. There is a transition from the sky, where the ravens appear once more, to the ground. The camera focuses on a figure curved on the sand: the witches, waiting for Macbeth. They are portrayed as one physical character, an old slender woman, dressed in a kind of dress. Nonetheless, she behaves as three different beings (for this reason, they will be referred to in the plural), all played by the same actress, Kathryn Hunter, who has been widely praised for her performance (MILLER, 2022). Coen’s choice of portraying the Weird Sisters as both three and one simultaneously, makes them supernatural. Thus, this depiction distances the witches from being interpreted as humans with only a connection to the uncanny, leaving little room to debate their unnatural origin. The uncertainty that revolves around them rests mostly on the level of influence that they have over Macbeth.

Figure 5: The Witches' first appearance in *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (Joel Coen, 2021)



Source: Riot Material

The witches move around in an unsettling manner. They twist themselves in a violent way, almost placing the foot above the head, and behave in almost inhuman ways, sometimes resembling, and even making sounds similar to that of a bird. Thus, the idea that they assume the form of a raven is the most probable. Their ability to perform these distorted acts is a fundamental point in their portrayal, intensifying the idea that all sorts of deeds can be expected from entities who exhibit such behavior.

The screen text is close to the playtext. It references the witches' charm performed for the sailor and mixes it with the one that they declaim before Macbeth's entrance. In the adaptation, the mix of the charms mentioned is directed to Macbeth, leading him to be the one who "should get no sleep" and live under a curse, thus, prophesying and condemning Macbeth to this fate.

FIRST WITCH: I'll drain him dry as hay.  
 Sleep shall neither night nor day  
 Hang upon his penthouse lid.  
 He shall live a man forbid (SHAKESPEARE, 2013, p. 15)

The witches cover themselves with a big mantle and conclude the spell. Macbeth and Banquo encounter the witches in what appears to be a battlefield, as there are dead soldiers in the background since the beginning of the scene. However, it was said earlier by the witches that they would meet with Macbeth in the heath, exactly as in the playtext. If they transport themselves to the battlefield instead, this could imply that the Weird Sisters articulate dubious words from the start, promising one thing and doing another. Thus, their words are not to be trusted. Also, the soldiers may be mere apparitions, products of a vision implanted by the witches in the background of the heath, although it does not look much like one. Macbeth and Banquo see two reflections on a water puddle, possibly created by the Weird Sisters, so they

could physically present themselves as three. This reinforces the witches' abstract presenting manner, as well as their ability to change. Banquo is the first to verbalize about their presence, and he reproduces a fragment of the playtext accordant to their portrayal as atypical entities in the adaptation:

BANQUO: 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? (SHAKESPEARE, 2013, p. 17)

As the prophecies are recited, fog begins to appear, and it is possible to hear the three different voices of the witches in unison. At some point, the three stand side by side. Whether it is an illusion or they are able to actually make these modifications, it is notable that the witches choose to present themselves as three to Macbeth and Banquo. It can either be a decision to resemble the witches in the playtext, or to reinforce that they can show themselves in various ways, giving them amplified power. After reporting the prophecies, the witches turn around and slowly vanish in the fog, in conformity to the playtext. The three assume the form of ravens again and fly over Macbeth and Banquo's head, bringing an end to this surrealist meeting. The title of the movie, which carries the word *tragedy* in it, only appears after this scene ends, announcing that Macbeth's collapse is about to develop.

Figure 6: The witches in the encounter with Macbeth and Banquo in *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (Joel Coen, 2021)



Source: Los Angeles Times

Subsequently, the witches are mentioned in the letter that Macbeth writes to Lady Macbeth and by Banquo. Coen's adaptation also includes the scene of the dagger materializing in front of Macbeth before Duncan's murder, which can be either a product of his own imagination, or a vision generated by the witches, considering that right after he kills Duncan, a dreadful sound made by a bird is heard. Additionally, when Banquo's ghost

appears to Macbeth at the banquet, he is preceded by a raven, reinforcing the idea that the witches are indeed the ones who make Macbeth have the visions and that they have impact over his acts.

The witches' next appearance does not happen as in the playtext. Instead, they reappear when Ross, a noble who, in this adaptation, and also in Polanski's film, portrays a morally complex character, hears them singing (possibly a song about Macbeth). Ross finds the witches impersonated as an old man, a reference to their appearance in the playtext, in which they are described as having a beard ("You should be women, And yet your beards forbid me to interpret That you are so" [SHAKESPEARE, 2013, p. 17]). The decision of portraying the witches as an old man reinforces the extent of their powers and, since they already transform into ravens, it is possible that they also transform into humans. Disguised as the old man, they dress simply and use a wooden walking stick. Their conversation seems to be about what happened when Duncan died and Macbeth became king. The witches describe Duncan's murder as "unnatural", consequently admitting their influence on the action. The addition of this encounter with Ross suggests that, besides interfering with Macbeth's destiny, they also have the power to interact and even influence other characters.

Their second encounter with Macbeth comes after bells' chimes, also used before Duncan's death, that is, to announce significant events. The voices of the witches pronounce the sentence "Tis time" twice, and the word "Tomorrow" appears on screen. Inside the castle, Macbeth awakes from his sleep by the branches of a tree tapping on the window. The witches appear physically as three, crouched in gaps of the ceiling. The faces of two representations of the witches are never shown, reinforcing the idea that they are three and one at the same time. They come to Macbeth before he looks for them, suggesting that they already knew that he would want to meet, or that it was part of his sealed fate.

The witches mention their masters, and from them, the prophecies are told to Macbeth, indicating that the witches' power is not unlimited. They invoke their masters using a spell and putting ingredients, such as a finger of a newborn, into the cauldron (represented by a huge amount of water that floods the room). Coen's adaptation does not include Hecate, thus the witches' masters are only visible through the apparitions that emerge in the water, depicted by children. The last child has a crown above the head, referencing Banquo's lineage of future kings. In an instant, the water and the witches are gone. The scene is the closest to

portray what witches were believed to be and do, as spells and incantations in cauldrons. Throughout the movie, Coen's Weird Sisters actively mold Macbeth's destiny, leading him to a future downward spiral with their prophecies and acts.

The witches make their last entrance in the ending scene of the movie, adopting the appearance of the old man, using the same clothes, hair and the same walking stick as previously. After Macbeth is defeated, when harmony is apparently restored, the witches, impersonated as the old man, accept a coin from Ross in exchange for Fleance, Banquo's son. In the playtext, Fleance is able to escape Macbeth's ambush, but does not reappear. This final modification implies that Ross will later use the child for his ambitions, and that the dispute for the crown is not over yet. It also insinuates that, in their earlier encounter, the witches could have used their powers in order to deceive and manipulate Ross as well. The movie ends with an uncountable amount of ravens invading the screen, reassuring that the prophecies and the witches' work will proceed and that they will continue to play with other characters' fate.

### **3.4 Comparative analysis of the witches in three film adaptations of *Macbeth***

For the final analysis section of this study, I aim to compare the adaptations previously analyzed, focusing on the portrayal of the witches in each movie, primarily in concern to their origin, the manner in which they are presented and level of influence that they pursue over Macbeth's decisions. In addition, I explore the distinctions and similarities between the witches in the cinematic productions.

The chronological order was used to introduce the adaptations, from oldest to most recent movie produced. As mentioned in advance, the release date of Polanski's *Macbeth* is 1971. To Kurzel's *Macbeth*, there is already a time span of 44 years, and to Coen's adaptation, 50 years. This distinguishes the first movie from the others analyzed adaptations. The last two movies were released more recently, with not only expanded options of resources, but also produced in a different socio-historical context.

The adaptations produced are distinguishable in multiple ways, even though they are based on the same playtext. For instance, Polanski's *Macbeth* is described by Aguero (2009, p. 4) as "the bloodiest adaptation ever made of a Shakespearean play". Similarly, Kurzel's

Macbeth is also incredibly violent, especially in its battle scenes. In contrast, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, directed by Coen, is shot in black and white, which differentiates the movie from the other adaptations, making it less bloody for the absence of red to portray blood. The characters' performances and minimalist ambience of many of the settings emphasize the movie's resemblance to a staged play, alluding to the original format of Shakespeare's work.

Thus, as the witches derive from three distinct works, they exhibit unique features in each characterization. According to Lawless (1999), the witches in *Macbeth* can be interpreted in various ways: "About the only thing, it seems, that we can truly describe the Weird Sisters as is *polysemic*". This extends to their interpretation in adaptations as well. The order of the analysis coincides with the level of supernatural that the Weird Sisters display. In each explored adaptation, the witches become more abstract, and their connection with the unknown only deepens. In opposition, the ambiguity of their origin diminishes.

The witches in Polanski's film are undoubtedly the closest to human nature among the three representations, thus, the more ambiguous regarding their origin. The uncertainty to view them as either marginalized women living under precarious conditions or mystical agents never ceases. Perhaps, the most congruent explanation is to perceive them as humans with enhanced abilities and knowledge, since, throughout the movie, they express qualities that align them with more than one origin. Firstly, they enter in a place instead of vanishing, as in the playtext, or as in the other two adaptations. Additionally, their appearance is closer to that of average women, even with a mysterious undertone. The scene in which the Weird Sisters' coven is revealed pictures the women present with diverse shapes and ages, all naked, making them appear more human. At the same time, they chant spells and engage in incantations made with repulsive items, revealing their connection to the sinister and unknown.

The witches in Kurzel's adaptation stand in the middle between Polanski's and Coen's Weird Sisters. Their origin is not portrayed as natural as in the first movie, and not as supernatural as in the third. Although in the 1971 film the witches adapt the most to well-known depictions of witches, in Kurzel's film they can still be interpreted as conveying to some of these depictions. Even without the presence of a cauldron or the uttering of spells, they have the support of tools (a mortar and pestle) to make a sort of incantation in the second encounter with Macbeth. Likewise, their appearance approximates them to Polanski's

witches, average women, if not for the scars equally placed in their foreheads. In Kurzel's adaptation, the witches resemble oracles, with the prophecies composedly recited. As Ribeiro (2022) notes, their presence is quiet and subtle. Their role is to report the prophecies and ensure that they are fulfilled. It is worth mentioning that both of the adaptations seem to portray a kind of apprentice of the witches, with the difference that in Polanski's film, the apprentice is one of the Weird Sisters, as Kurzel added a fourth witch to the plot.

Coen's witches are rooted in the supernatural within their first moments on screen, and the elements derived from this nature only enhance with the unfolding of the narrative. Coen's adaptation is the one that plays the most with the possibilities involving the fantastical and the witches. Their physical representation differentiates considerably from the other Weird Sisters, as not only are they portrayed by only one actress, but at the same time that they behave as three distinct entities, their manners do not resemble humans. Also, Coen inserts scenes that suggest that the witches can alter their form to animals or humans, something that the witches in Polanski's and Kurzel's adaptations are not able to do. The presence and uttering of spells and incantations is evident; however, at times they resemble a curse. When revealing the apparitions to Macbeth, they do not offer anything for him to drink. The visions are crafted by the Weird Sisters, probably without external assistance. This intensifies their powers, especially when compared with the other two films.

A great number of elements that involve the witches in the playtext are kept in the adaptations, as others disappear from the screen. In the playtext, the witches' invocations of Hecate occur briefly, and they are omitted in the films. The decision to not portray Hecate can be seen as a cinematic choice, providing the directors with greater autonomy to connect the witches to elements that are relevant in their adaptations. Still, in all three films, the witches have masters, suggesting that their powers (regardless of the degree) are not unrestricted. The scenes in which they appear range considerably, as well as their depiction. In the 1971 adaptation, Polanski decides to portray the visions as a frenetic montage of people and places overlapping each other, while in the two latest versions, it happens in a more discreet manner.

An element present in all adaptations, but that has particularities in each of them, is the fog. In Polanski's adaptation, it is notably present when the witches are on screen. Even though they do not disappear among the fog, it is possible that they are the ones conjuring it. In Kurzel's film, the fog is not an element exclusively tied to the witches, although it serves



to convey the notion of the witches' vanishing, similarly to what occurs in Coen's adaptation. Illuminating the manner in which this detail is implemented reinforces the distinction of the origins and characteristics of the Weird Sisters in each movie.

As the central point of the plot revolves around Macbeth's journey, one of the significant aspects to be explored is the level of influence of the witches over the protagonist. In the three analyzed adaptations, the witches, at least to some extent, appear to have an impact over Macbeth's actions and, subsequently, his destiny.

In Kurzel's adaptation, the witches disappear upon Macbeth's death, which presumably concludes their duty. However, both Polanski's and Coen's adaptations end with a sense of ongoing narrative. In the 1971 movie, it is possible to hear the witches' chant in the ending scene captivating Donalbain, a character that could possibly restart the fight for the crown. Yet, Coen's film takes a step further as the witches actively mold Macbeth's and even other characters' fate. With the ability to transform their appearance, the Weird Sisters interact with other characters on screen, especially Ross, who seems tempted to lead the dispute. Notably, in both adaptations, Ross is an unreliable character, manipulative and evil. In Polanski's film, he provides information to both Macbeth and Malcolm (Duncan's son and one of Macbeth's eventual opponents). In Coen's adaptation, his sinister and ambitious side increases. He not only supervises Banquo's murder, but takes Fleance under his control. He also has a role in the massacre of Macduff's family and is possibly involved in Lady Macbeth's death, as he seems to be the last person to see her alive. The importance that Ross has in the plot is enhanced by the witches in their encounters. Thus, when comparing the three adaptations, Coen's Weird Sisters are the ones who are most able to change and influence not only Macbeth's destiny, but what surrounds it.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The subsequent part of this study includes the final remarks regarding the image of the witches in Shakespeare's play, *Macbeth*, in conjunction with their portrayal in the three analyzed cinematic adaptations, those of Polanski's (1971), Kurzel's (2015) and Coen's (2021) films. The main purpose of this paper is to compare the image of the witch in Literature, using the play *Macbeth* as basis, and examine in which ways it is transported to a different media, the cinema.

The first segment of the research focused on the historical context of witchcraft, in particular, on the beliefs that were perpetuated in European societies, rampant after the beginning of the Modern Era, resulting in the image of the witch as it is widely known in contemporary days. During the witch hunts, the amount of women amongst the charged and sent to trial for witchcraft was prominent, attaching women with the figure of the witch. Exploring the convictions and the manners in which these convictions were promoted grants an important context for the analysis of Shakespeare's portrayal of witches, taking into account that he lived and wrote at a period in which the events mentioned were occurring.

The analysis of the witches in Shakespeare's play showcases that the author mixed multiple beliefs from diverse sources to build the characters. The witches are portrayed as unusual beings with uncertain origin, interacting with mystical features and instruments in order to report the prophecies and interfere with Macbeth's fate. As for the film adaptations, their portrayal varies considerably. Each film makes their depictions unique.

Regarding the adaptations analyzed, it is worth mentioning that witches' depiction ranges from a more human appearance to that of supernatural beings, although in the most human-looking of the interpretations they already revolve around a mysterious aura. Despite their several particularities, all three adaptations portray the witches as having enhanced knowledge and power over Macbeth, or even over other characters as well, such as in Coen's film.

Comparing the interpretation of the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth* to their distinct portrayals in the film adaptations exposes the complexity of their nature, at the same time that it accentuates the decisions, divergent or similar, made by the directors in determining the function and significance that they convey within each story.

For instance, in depictions that differ widely from the play, as in *Men of Respect* (1991) and *A Floresta que se Move* (2015), the three witches are portrayed as fortune tellers. In Orson Welles' *Macbeth* (1948), the witches build a clay figure of the protagonist, literally molding him and his actions. In Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957), the three witches are replaced by a single ghost-like (male) witch with a spinning wheel. In the 2010 made-for-TV *Macbeth* with Patrick Stewart, the Weird Sisters are substituted by three nuns

who are hospital nurses and thus have power over those who live and those who die.

In the adaptations examined in this study, the witches are consistently portrayed as a trio of women, despite the noticeable variations, transitioning from women with a connection to the supernatural, progressing to their representation as oracles and finally, to otherworldly beings. These portrayals are effective choices, aligning with the films' intended tone and purposes.

Hence, as a final point, the witches' importance to the narratives is unquestionable. This can be perceived not only in the play or in the chosen films, but in the multiple adaptations made of *Macbeth* through time. Regardless of the amount of changes and differences in the portrayals, their characters are always represented in some manner, making the Weird Sisters a key element, without whom Macbeth's story would be incomplete, or it would even not exist at all.

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