

this point, because I think it a most important one, if we wish thoroughly to appreciate the weird grandeur and grotesque horror of the agents of the Evil One, who led a great warrior, if not a great man, to his predestined doom.

Shakespeare, with the directness which is one of his chief characteristics as a dramatist, gives no introductory note of warning to the audience before the weird and skinny hags appear. His purpose was to make the Supernatural the chief moving element in the play; it was to be the agent which should cause events, determine characters, bring life to some, and death and distinction to others—in a word, it was to be the Play itself. He opens the tragedy, therefore, with: "A desert place—Thunder and lightning—Enter three witches." The brevity of this scene is its most remarkable feature. It consists of twelve lines only—lines of question and answer between the three witches; no explanation, no hint of any design on their part against Macbeth; merely, "When shall we three meet again?" the time settled—"When the hurly burly's done:" the place settled—"Upon the heath:" the purpose settled—"There to meet with Macbeth." And yet what a keynote to the whole tragedy these twelve lines strike! What an example of Shakespeare's marvellous powers of condensation! And we must here again remember the audience for which they were written. That audience would at once recognize the scene as the closing of a witch's Sabbath, and all their unholy business done—crops blighted, cattle smitten with disease, ships wrecked, lives blasted—all that remained was to determine "When shall we three meet again?" Mr. Spalding, in his "Elizabethan Demonology," suggests that Shakespeare drew upon Scandinavian mythology in part, at any rate, for the witches, and that they are Norns rather than witches. His reason is that in the

first scene each sister takes the special part of one of the Norns. "The third," he says, "is the special prophetess, whilst the first takes cognizance of the past, and the second of the present, in affairs connected with humanity. These are the tasks of Urda, Verdandi, and Skulda. The first begins by asking, 'When shall we three meet again?' The second decides the time: 'When the battle's lost and won.' The third prophesies the future: 'That will be ere the set of sun.' The first again asks: 'Where?' The second decides: 'Upon the heath.' The third prophesies the future: 'There to meet with Macbeth.'" This may by some be thought fanciful. The coincidence, at any rate, is a striking one. Shakespeare may, or may not, have heard of Urda, Verdandi, and Skulda, and their attributes, and if he had, we may be sure that whatever that all-absorbing mind took in, it gave out again in heaped-up measure. His store of knowledge, wherever and however acquired, was like the Widow's cruise. But I think we may be also reasonably certain of this, viz., that he did not wish to present Norns to his audience, but witches—witches such as they understood and believed in.

Coleridge says: "The weird sisters are as true a creation of Shakespeare as his Ariel and Caliban; fates, fairies, and materializing witches being the elements. They presented a sufficient external resemblance to the creatures of vulgar prejudice to act immediately on the audience. Their character consists in the imaginative disconnected from the good; they are the shadowy, obscure, and fearfully anomalous of physical nature—elemental avengers without sex or kin." This seems to me, allowing for the concluding flight of fancy, a true description of the witches.

The next time they appear it is the scene of their adjourned Sabbath—"A heath—Thunder"—and before Macbeth arrives to meet his fate, Shakes