Inter-Textual Relations between Reginald Scot's "The Discoverie of Witchcraft" and Shakespeare's "Macbeth"

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Literature has its specific world, and in that world texts do not exist separately. They collaborate with one another creating complicated inter-textual dimensions. Literature also provides a space where the diverse imaginative elements with their inherent and adherent connotations are applied in, and where texts appear in such inter-textual relations that reading and appreciating a piece of literary work becomes more and more complicated because it requires an ability of creative and analytical disposition to see and understand more than is directly stated in the context. A literary text is considered a totality, in which several allusive elements are embraced and because of this we should go into the depth of the text and study it thoroughly to find out those elements which are taken from another text. This is a way to assimilate the two texts together and to observe not only allusive elements within the texts but also the influence of one text on the other. Thus, the present article focuses on the influence of Reginald Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* on William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. We will try to find out in what inter-textual dimensions these texts appear, and at what specific levels the influence of Scot's book can be observed on the above mentioned play.

The Discoverie of Witchcraft is considered one of the most useful and primary sources for the study of witchcraft and magic not only for literary, but also for cultural-anthropological and social-historical studies. The book is a collection of different sources. Scot used a wide range of both contemporary and ancient materials and stories from the writers of the inquisition about the so-called supposed witches. Scot was also familiar with a number of witchcraft pamphlets and trial records which had their manifestations in *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (Almond 2011:4-5, 16-21).

Scot was a critical and skeptical person toward the issues concerning witchcraft and magic. The writer's critical position and his skepticism are emphasized and repeated again and again throughout the whole work. Even from the very beginning the author's position on the subject becomes clear: "The fables of Witchcraft have taken so fast hold and deepe root in the heart of man, that fewe or none can (nowadaies) with patience indure the hand and correction of God. For if any adversitie, greefe, sickness, losse of childen, corne, cattell, or libertie happen unto them; by & by they exclaim euppon witches. As though there were no God in Israel that ordereth all things according to his will; punishing both just and unjust with greefs, plagues, and afflictions in maner and forme as he thinketh good…" (Scot 1972:1).

Reginald Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* provides such a wide range of information on witchcraft and the occult that it really could serve as a real encyclopedia and a good sourcebook for several writers. Focusing on our specific topic we should note that while drawing textual parallels it seems that the following extract taken from *Macbeth* has its accurate echoes in Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft:*

First witch: *Where hast thou been, sister?*
Second witch: *Killing swine*.
("Macbeth" I.iii.1-2)

A similar narrative of livestock killing by the supposed witches is found in In Scot's Book 1, chapter 1 (*For if any adversitie, greefe, sicknesse, losse of children, corne, cattell, or libertie happen unto them; by and by they exclaime upon witches* (Scot 1972:1-2).

Moreover, in another chapter of the same book Scot writes: "…sometimes she curs-seth one, and sometimes another; and that from the maister of the house, his wife, children, cattell, etc. to the little pig that lieth in the stie. Thus in the processe of time they have all displeased hir, and she hath wished evill lucke unto them all …" (Scot 1972:5).

However, in *Macbeth* the reference to the village witchcraft story of killing domestic animals by the so-called witches is very brief. It is expressed only within a few lines in the play. As Diane Purkiss suggests in *The Witch in History*, it is "condensed into a single gesture" (Purkiss 2002:209).

According to the narrative of attacking cattle in villages, the supposed witches were poor and old women who would usually beg and ask something to eat from their neighbours, and if they were refused, they could take revenge by cursing and killing their neighbors' children, domestic animals, etc. (Scot 1972:4-7). In the same chapter of his book Scot writes that sometimes those miserable and poor women themselves believed that they could really do such things which he finds to be beyond the abilities of human nature. Scot states that all those things were the results of people's fantasies only. However, Shakespeare's reference is too short and implicit to enable us to conclude that Shakespeare was also skeptical on the subject of witchcraft in the same way as Scot was. And the fact that Shakespeare did not go into the depth of the witchcraft stories *in Macbeth* and made only a slight reference to them, might mean that Shakespeare was not especially interested in an accurate, exact and thorough presentation of witch-lore and also in the presentation of the social problems of the village women in details on stage. However, whether he was interested in it or not, through this one-line presentation of village witch-lore stories he portrays the figure of the witch in his play. Thus, by "killing swine", he automatically endows his witch with attributes which the so-called village witches were thought to possess in those days. However, as the next examples will show, the play-witch is not a pure village witch in *Macbeth*, but a more complicated product, a compound figure of a "witch" created by the author.

The act of revenge by the witch for being refused in food is more explicitly revealed in the next lines within the same scene:

First witch: *A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap,*
And munched, and munched, and munched. 'Give me', qouth I;
'Aroynt thee, witch', the rump-fed ronyon cries.
Her husband's to Aleppo gone, master o'th' Tiger;

But in a sieve I'll thither sail,
And like a rat without a tail,
I'll do, I'll do, I'll do.

Second witch: *I'll give thee a wind.*
Third witch: *And I another.*
First witch: *...I'll drain him dry as hay;*
Sleep shall neither night nor day…
("Macbeth" I.iii.4-10; 18-19)

We could consider the following passage an allusive element from Scot's work as the archetypes of the witch stories found in the following extract have their traces in *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, and, naturally, for this scene Shakespeare might also consult Scot's book.

In the play the cause of the witch's revenge is stated more obviously in the present extract rather than it was in the previous one: the witch asks for chestnuts, she is refused, and she is ready to revenge. But at this time the target of her revenge is not a domestic animal, as it was in the previous example, and neither the victim is directly the sailor's wife but it is the sailor. The first witch knows that *her husband's to Aleppo gone, master o'th' Tiger*, and she decides to sail there and to take revenge. The other *Weird Sisters* are going to help her by raising storms. The first witch also decides to *drain him dry as hay*, in other words she is going to make the sailor impotent, thus destroying family relationship between the husband and the wife. As for the act of raising a storm, on this Scot also writes that the witch-hunters believed that the supposed witches were able to raise a wind, storm, tempest, etc.

Yet we read *In malleomaleficarum* of three sorts of witches. "And among the hurtfull witches he saith there is one sort more beastlie than any kind of beasts … for these usuallie devoure and eate young children … . These be they (saith he) that raise haile, tempests, and hutrfull weather; as lightening, thunder, etc." (Scot 1972:5).

In the same chapter Scot concludes that all people who believed in all those things were faithless people, as only God could possess such power to create storms, tempests, etc. According to another tradition stated in that skeptical book, the supposed witches could also make men become impotent:

But here again we may not forget the inquisitors note, "to wit; that manie are so bewitched that they cannot use their owne wives: but anie other bodies they maie well enough away withal" (Scot 1972:45).

Scot finds this ridiculous and writes: "… witchcraft is practiced among manie bad husbands, for whom it were a good excuse to saie they were bewitched" (Ibid).

In the above extracts taken from *Macbeth* three village witch-lore stories were combined and expressed simultaneously within a few lines. In all three examples Shakespeare gives a very short reference to those village witch stories. No direct verbal borrowings can be noticed from *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* in *Macbeth*. Neither Shakespeare follows any single discourse to present the subject of witchcraft and the fig-

ure of the witch in his play. Most of his references are implicit and very brief which, in turn, makes it difficult to interpret both the character of the witch in *Macbeth* and Shakespeare's own attitude toward the subject. While Scot's criticism and skepticism on the subject of witchcraft are emphasized in each chapter of his book, Shakespeare uses a laconic style while introducing the notions of witchcraft in his play: he provides as much information on witchcraft stories as it is necessary for him to create the figure of the witch in *Macbeth*. And there is only one instance in the play which could be considered an explicit allusion from Scot's book. While drawing parallels between Scot's text and the play, it becomes obvious that the physical depiction of the witches in *Macbeth* stands very close to the witch description given in Scot's book.

Banquo: *What are these,*
So withered, and so wild in their attire,
That look not like th'inhabitantso'th' earth
And yet are on't? – Live you, or are you aught
That man may question? You seem to understand me,
By each at once her choppy finger laying
Upon her skinny lips. You should be women,
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so.

("Macbeth" I.iii.39-46)

In *Macbeth* the *secret, black, and midnight hags* who are old, ugly, deformed women with skinny lips remind us those witches that can be found in The *Discoverie of Witchcraft:* "One sort of such as are said to bee wicthes, are women which be commonly old, lame, bleare-eied, pale, fowle, and full of wrinkles; poore, sullen, superstitious…" (Scot 1972:4). According to Scot, those women who were old and poor could become potential targets of supposed witches in villages. The author criticizes severely such kind of attitude toward those poor, old and vulnerable women who were not even able to protect themselves from witch-mongers. Scot finds all such stories false and ridiculous. As for Shakespeare, he very skillfully creates a theatrical figure of a witch without providing any additional information that could help us to comment on his position toward the subject in general. Shakespeare leaves a question of the interpretation of the witch figure open in the play but at the same time he gradually emphasizes the play-witches' dual nature which gradually becomes more visible throughout the whole play.

The next textual parallel between the works that can be observed is the scene of the cauldron where the witches go into dance:

Third witch: *Scale of dragon, tooth of wolf,*
Witch's mummy, maw and gulf
Of the ravined salt-sea shark;
Root of hemlock, diggdI'th' dark;
Finger of birth-starngled babe

Ditch-delivered by a drab:
Make the gruel thick and slab;
Add thereto a tiger's chawdron,
For th' ingredience of our cauldron.
("Macbeth" IV.i.22-25; 30-35)

When we draw parallels between the play cauldron scene and that of Scot's version, we find out that the cauldron and the dancing-singing rituals around it are typical of continental witchcraft tradition and not of the English one: "So as, if there be anie children unbaptised, or not garded with the signe of the crosse, or orizons; the witches may and doo catch them from their mothers sides in the night…, or otherwise kill them with their ceremonies… and seeth them in a caldron, until their flesh be made potable. Of the thickest whereof they make ointments, whereby they ride in the aire … these night-walking or rather night-dansing witches, brought out of Itlalie into France, that danse, which is called *Lsvolta"* (Scot 1972:23-4).

In the same chapter Scot writes that all these things are untrue and fake stories created by witch-hunters. And finally, Scot denies definitely the existence of witches and witch stories when he writes: "But what sorts of witches so ever *M. Mal.* Or *Bodin*s aie there are; *Moses*s pakeonlie of foure kinds of impious couseners or witches (whereof our witchmongers old women which danse with their fairies, etc; are none" (Scot 1972:62).

Thus, in *Macbeth* the old and ugly hags are also endowed with continental witches' features of dancing-singing about the cauldron. But at the same time it seems that Shakespeare is not interested in presenting the cauldron traditions accurately in the play. Though he provides a long list of ingredients which should go into the cauldron, none of those ingredients has its real archetype, and probably they are chosen "to give a frisson shock rather than to follow English or Continental practice" (Purkiss 2002:212). And only one of those ingredients, "finger of birth-strangled babe" has its pre-textual archetype in Scot's work. As it can be seen from the above mentioned extract cited from *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, the cauldron ritual is more related to the Continental Sabbaths, in which unbaptized babies were said to be boiled for making flying-ointments. And again from the whole narrative of the witchcraft rituals Shakespeare makes a general and brief hint to those stories in *Macbeth*.

Taking into consideration all the above mentioned facts, the analyses of the examples and textual parallels we may conclude that both direct and indirect brief references cannot serve as a means for understanding and interpreting the figure of the witch in the play properly. The figure of the witch created in *Macbeth* is complicated. The witches have a dual nature in the play: they are old and poor, but at the same time they dance and sing happily and actively around the cauldron; they are village witches who are endowed with features of the continental witchcraft characters and not only of the English ones; they make prophecies which can be understood or interpreted in terms of failure or success, truth or lie; they "should be women" and yet their beards give a basis for hesitation. Throughout the whole play Shakespeare gradually introduces a new type of a witch, a play-witch which, in turn, due to its mixed and compound character becomes a non-inter-

pretable figure. Interestingly, Shakespeare does not give specific names to the witches either. They are called as the Weird Sisters, and the word *Witchis* is mentioned only once in the play in Act 1, scene 6. Thus, by making them somehow nameless by not exactly naming them as witches, Shakespeare probably suggests that we think over their dual nature. He never gives a final solution for the character interpretation of the Weird Sisters. And it seems that Shakespeare again emphasizes the witches' dual character in *Macbeth*. It is also noticeable through drawing parallels between *Macbeth* and *the Discoverie of Witchcraft*, that, unlike Scot, Shakespeare never expresses, at least, explicit skepticism toward the phenomenon of witchcraft. Shakespeare uses witchcraft material as much as he needs for depicting the figure of a play-witch, and his allusions are too brief to enable us to conclude anything concerning his position toward witchcraft. However, the figure of a dual-character witch could be considered a means through which Shakespeare could "invite" us to see skepticism as a tool of investigation of the subject, which would allow exploring what was "fair" and what was "foul". Moreover, King James, who had been credulous in his work *Demonology,* gradually adopted a skeptical view becoming an exposer of fraud rather than a persecutor of witches (Brooke 1990:20). Hence, Shakespeare's created figure of the play-witch, the status of which was not fixed because of its dual and complicated character and because Shakespeare does not follow any single specific witch-lore tradition while creating the witch's figure, could be considered an implicit appeal to James King's gradual increasing skeptical view toward the subject.

References:

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Ռ. Սկոտի ‹‹Կախարդության բացահայտումը›› գրքի և Վ. Շեքսպիրի ‹‹Մակբեթ›› ողբերգության միջտեքստային կապը

Սույն հոդվածն անդրադառնում է Ռեջինալդ Սկոտի ‹‹Կախարդության բացահայտումը›› գրքի և Շեքսպիրի ‹‹Մակբեթ›› ողբերգության միջտեքստային հարաբերությունների ուսումնասիրությանը: Այս երկու տեքստերը գտվում են բարդ միջ-

տեքստային հարաբերությունների մեջ: Այսպես, Սկոտը իր բացահայտ կասկածներն է արտահայտում կախարդություն երևույթի և կախարդներ հասկացության նկատմամբ: Շեքսպիրն ամենայն հավանականությամբ անդրադարձել է Սկոտի ստեղծագործությանը իր ողբերգության երեք գուշակ-կախարդ քույրերի կերպարները կերտելիս և նկարագրելիս: Ու թեև ակնհայտ է Շեքսպիրի անդրադարձը Սկոտի վերոնշյալ գործին, այնուամենայիվ, մի բան մնում է ոչ այդքան պարզ. դժվար է միանշանակ եզրակացնել, որ երկու գրողներն էլ կիսում էին միևնույն կարծիքը կախարդություն և հմայություն երևույթների նկատմամբ: Այդուհանդերձ, կարելի է եզրակացնել, որ Սկոտն ու իր ստեղծագործությունը կարևոր դեր են խաղում շեքսպիրյան ստեղծագործությունը ուսումնասիրելու և վերլուծելու գործում: