

## **How does Shakespeare present the Witches?**

Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* at a time when interest in witchcraft bordered on hysteria. Witches were blamed for causing illness, death and disaster, and were thought to punish their enemies by giving them nightmares, making their crops fail and their animals sicken. Witches were thought to allow the Devil to suckle from them in the form of an animal, such as 'Graymalkin' and 'Paddock', the grey cat and the toad mentioned by the Witches in Act 1, Scene 1. Those who were convicted were often tortured, their trials reported in grisly detail in pamphlets that circulated in their hundreds. Often, those accused of witchcraft lived on the edges of society: they were old, poor and unprotected, and were therefore easy to blame.

King James VI of Scotland was deeply concerned about the threat posed by witches. He believed that a group of witches had tried to kill him by drowning him while he was at sea (a curse echoed here by the First Witch). During his reign thousands of people in Scotland were put on trial for witchcraft. In 1604, under his rule as king of England and Wales, witchcraft was made a capital offence, meaning that anyone who was found guilty of being a witch could be executed. When Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* in 1606, then, he knew that his audience would have felt a mixture of fear and fascination for the three 'weird sisters', their imaginations captivated by the mysterious meeting on the desolate heath with which the play begins.

Shakespeare's portrayal of the Witches in Act 1, Scene 3 draws directly on many of the beliefs about witchcraft that his audience would have held. They harm animals (as when the Second Witch reports, matter-of-factly, that she has been 'killing swine' (1.3.2)). Their power over the elements means that they can control the winds, raise storms and sail in sieves. They use gruesome ingredients such as body parts (the 'pilot's thumb' (1.3.28)) in their spells. They are also deeply vindictive. The First Witch vows to make the sailor suffer simply because his wife refuses to give in to her gluttonous demand. Her reaction is shockingly, disproportionately cruel: she vows to drain the life out of him until he is 'dry as hay' (1.3.18) and curses him with a tortuous inability to sleep, declaring 'He shall live a man forbid' (1.3.21) and that he shall 'dwindle, peak and pine' (1.3.23). This is a clear example of the crime known in Shakespeare's day as 'mischief following anger', a punishment inflicted as a result of some kind of grievance. Shakespeare uses this passage, then, to

demonstrate the Witches' vindictive nature, leaving the audience in no doubt as to their connection with the powers of evil.

### The Witches' language

Throughout the play, the language used by the Witches helps to mark them out as mysterious and other-worldly. They speak in verse, but it is a form of verse that is very different from that which is used by most of Shakespeare's characters. Many of the lines in this passage are in rhyming couplets, in contrast to the unrhymed verse used elsewhere in the play. Rather than speaking in an iambic metre, with alternating unstressed and stressed syllables, the Witches speak in a trochaic metre, with stressed syllables followed by unstressed. In addition, where most of Shakespeare's verse lines have five stresses, the Witches' lines typically only have four. In this scene, compare Macbeth's first line with the First Witch's description of how she will torture the sailor:

MACBETH            So foul and fair a day I have not seen. (1.3.38)

FIRST WITCH            Sleep shall neither night nor day  
                                 Hang upon his penthouse lid;  
                                 He shall live a man forbid (1.3.19–21)

These heavy stresses give the Witches' speech a sense of foreboding that emphasises their malevolence and unearthliness. In the First Witch's lines, they make her vendetta against the sailor seem relentless. At the end of this passage, when the Witches chant in unison, they bring a sense of eeriness.

It's also worth noting that the Witches' speech is full of numbers. The First Witch will make the sailor's torture last 'sev'nnights, nine times nine' (1.3.22): a 'sev'nnight' was a week (seven nights), so the sailor will suffer for 81 weeks. As the Witches chant, they move 'Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine / And thrice again, to make up nine' (1.3.35–36). There are further examples of the number three: the sailor's wife 'mounch'd, and mounch'd, and mounch'd' (1.3.5); the First Witch repeats 'I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do' (1.1.10); and there are, of course, three witches. Three is a number that is often seen as having a

particular significance. In Christianity, for example, there is the Holy Trinity: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Bad luck is frequently thought to come in threes. Macbeth is hailed by three titles (Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor and King hereafter) and is later given three prophecies. When the Witches concoct their famous spell in Act 4, Scene 1, they begin with two references to the number three:

FIRST WITCH                      Thrice the brinded cat hath mew'd.

SECOND WITCH Thrice, and once the hedge-pig whin'd. (4.1.1–2)

Nine, meanwhile, is a multiple of three: therefore, 'nine' and 'nine times nine' multiplies and reinforces the power of the number three. Is Shakespeare suggesting that the Witches are a kind of unholy trinity? It's an obvious conclusion.

How does this scene fit into Macbeth as a whole?

This is the second time that we've met the Witches, and the second time that they've mentioned Macbeth, building a sense of anticipation for their forthcoming encounter. In Act 1, Scene 2, Macbeth is presented as a loyal warrior, a hero who fights valiantly on the battlefield to defend his country against invasion and treachery. Yet the association between Macbeth and the Witches introduces a different side to his character. The battle referred to by the Second Witch in Act 1, Scene 1 could be interpreted as not just a literal battle (the conflict raging between Scotland and Norway) but also a metaphorical battle: the battle for Macbeth's soul. It's significant, therefore, that Macbeth's first words to the Witches – 'So foul and fair a day I have not seen' (1.3.38) – echo the Witches' chant, 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair', from Act 1, Scene 1 (1.11). Banquo soon echoes the Witches, too, asking Macbeth, 'Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair?' (1.3.51–52). This allusion is loaded with dramatic irony: while Banquo perceives the Witches' prophecies as 'fair', the audience is already aware things are not necessarily what they seem. Banquo introduces an element of doubt, too, by framing his observation within a question. The Witches' paradox – which indicates that appearances can be deceiving – is central to the play and reverberates through

the major characters. Take Lady Macbeth, for example: ‘look like th' innocent flower, / But be the serpent under't’ (1.5.65–66).

When Macbeth and Banquo meet the Witches, their reactions give us an important insight into their personalities. Banquo is unafraid, but Macbeth ‘start[s]’ (1.3.51), or flinches, and ‘seems rapt’ (1.3.57), so mystified by their greeting that he is rendered speechless. Once he has regained his composure, he challenges the Witches to tell him more. They vanish, but it is not long before Macbeth finds that he is to become Thane of Cawdor – a ‘truth’ that immediately sets him wondering how the Witches’ final prophecy will come about, and losing himself in the ‘horrible imaginings’ (1.3.138) that will eventually lead to the murder of King Duncan. Later in the play, it is Macbeth who seeks out the Witches, cementing his willingness to give himself over to the ‘instruments of darkness’ (1.3.124).

How have the Witches been interpreted?

It is Banquo who first describes the Witches. His words in Act 1, Scene 3 depict the Witches as stereotypical hags – ‘withered’ and ‘wild’, unearthly beings (‘That look not like th' inhabitants o' th' Earth’) with ‘skinny lips’, chapped (‘choppy’) fingers and beards (1.3.40–46).

In William Shakespeare’s play “Macbeth”, the witches are weird sisters. In some way, they resemble the mythological Fates, who impersonally control the human destiny. They are malevolent characters. They embody evil. They control the sequence of events of the play in true sense. When they meet Macbeth and Banquo, they greet Macbeth as the thane of Glamis, the thane of Cawdor, and also as the future king of Scotland. The three figures predict that Banquo would be ‘lesser than Macbeth and greater! not so happy, but much happier!’ and that his descendants would be kings, although he would never reign. Although Banquo regards the witches as ‘ministers of darkness’, who tell men truths in little things to betray them into deeds of greatest consequences, Macbeth is obsessed with their prophecy. On the fulfillment of the first, these prophecies motivate both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to be the king and the queen of Scotland. So Macbeth murders King Duncan, and becomes the king himself, and kills Banquo and Macduff’s family. In this way, the prediction of the witches leads Macbeth to the path of self-destruction. Tormented by terrible dreams and miserable thoughts, Macbeth meets the witches once again to know from them about the worst that may happen. The witches show him three spirits

and a procession of eight shadowy kings followed by Banquo's ghost. The first spirit, an armed head, tells Macbeth to be aware of Macduff. The second spirit, a bloody child, tells him that he would not be harmed by anyone born of woman. The third spirit, a crowned child with a branch of a tree in its hand, tells Macbeth that he would not be vanquished until Birnam wood comes to Dunsinane. The procession of eight shadowy kings followed by Banquo's ghost suggests that Banquo's descendants would be kings. After losing his last hold of confidence, Macbeth assesses the predictions and promises of the witches as 'lying equivocations'. According to him, they deceive people with words that have double meanings. They kept their promise literally, but disappointed his hopes with a different meaning. Finally, Birnam wood moves to Dunsinane as Malcolm's soldiers come forward, each of them carrying a branch of tree from Birnam wood. Macduff, who was untimely taken out from his mother's womb, challenges Macbeth and beheads him. In the play Macbeth, everything happens in line with the predictions of the witches.