




# WITCHCRAFT in Shakespeare's Time



**M**any of Shakespeare's plays contain supernatural elements that are difficult for modern audiences to accept. In *Julius Caesar*, for example, there are many strange portents and omens<sup>1</sup> before the assassination of Caesar. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* there are fairies. In *Hamlet* the action of the play depends on the appearance of the ghost of Hamlet's father. In *Macbeth* there are the witches and Banquo's ghost.

It is impossible for us to know what Shakespeare himself believed about ghosts and other supernatural phenomena. Quite a lot is known, however, about what other people believed in Shakespeare's time.

Belief in witches was widespread in Shakespeare's time. It was said that witches were given their power by the devil, and that they could be very dangerous. Many women were executed because they were said to be witches.

At around the time that *Macbeth* was written there was a very public debate about witches in England. Scot, in his *Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584), argued that witches did not really exist. He said that the women accused of being witches were often the victims of false accusation. King James took a personal interest in the subject of witchcraft, and wrote a book on the subject, *Demonology* (1597). The King believed that witches existed, and secretly attended the trials of women accused of being witches. He made sure that the law against them was strengthened.

In the theatre, witchcraft and the devil were popular themes with audiences. Miracle plays had been popular from the 14th century until the 16th century.

1. **portents and omens** : indications of what is likely to happen in the future.



*Macbeth consulting the Vision of the Armed Head (1793)*  
by Henry Fuseli.



These frequently had roles for devils and supernatural characters. Although the miracle plays had died out by the time *Macbeth* was written, fascination with supernatural themes was still popular. One of Shakespeare's contemporaries, Christopher Marlowe, wrote a very popular play about possession by the Devil, called *The Tragical History of Dr Faustus* (1604).

A lot of the people who went to see Shakespeare's plays would have found the witches' presence in *Macbeth* exciting and frightening.

**1 Match the supernatural elements with the play in which they appear.**

**SUPERNATURAL EVENTS**

- a. Strange portents and omens
- b. Fairies
- c. Ghost
- d. Witches

**PLAY**

- 1. *Hamlet*
- 2. *Macbeth*
- 3. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
- 4. *Julius Caesar*

**2 Two books about witchcraft are mentioned in the text. What are their titles, and who wrote them?**

**3 Which of Shakespeare's contemporaries wrote a play about possession by the Devil?**

**4 What was the attitude of King James I to witchcraft?**

**5 According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, miracle plays were a form of Medieval drama based on events in the Bible or the lives of saints. What can you add to this information, from what you have read in this section? How did miracle plays influence the theatre over the centuries?**

**6 How did audiences in Shakespeare's time react to portrayals of the supernatural? What is your own view of such phenomena as ghosts and witches?**



## PART FIVE



# MACBETH AND THE SPIRITS



T

hat night the witches were in their usual place where they were soon joined by the Goddess, Hecate. She was angry with them because they had spoken to Macbeth.

‘You’ve been playing with Macbeth!’ she screamed at them. ‘You’ve been making promises to him – and he believes you. Who gave you permission to do that? Why did you do it without asking me first? You were wrong to do anything without asking me first!’

The witches were afraid of Hecate because she was very powerful.

‘Listen to me,’ Hecate said. ‘Macbeth will come to you in the morning. He wants to know his future. This time you must do as I tell you.’

Macbeth went out in the morning to meet the three witches. When he found them they were standing over their cooking-pot. One of the witches



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threw a toad <sup>1</sup> into the pot, and they all laughed.

‘A toad, yes, a toad!’ the others cried. ‘That’s good, a toad! We’ll put that in.’

Then they began to sing as they stirred the contents of the pot:

‘Round, around, around, about, about,  
Wicked staying in, good staying out.  
By the feeling in my thumb  
Something wicked is about to come.’

Macbeth looked at the witches with disgust.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked. ‘What kind of magic is this?’

‘We can’t tell you,’ one of the witches replied.

‘I have come here,’ Macbeth told them, ‘to ask you something. You must tell me the truth!’

‘Ask us your question,’ the first witch said.

‘We will answer,’ the second witch said.

‘If you don’t trust <sup>2</sup> us,’ the third witch said, ‘our masters will come to answer your question. Would you prefer that?’

‘Call your masters,’ commanded Macbeth. ‘I want to see them. Call them for me now.’

The witches stirred their cooking-pot, and spoke some magic words. Suddenly Macbeth saw a head floating in the air in front of him. Macbeth began to speak.

‘Tell me, whoever you are – ’

‘Don’t speak!’ the witches shouted. ‘Listen,



1. toad :



2. trust : believe.



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but don't speak. He knows what you want.'

The head began to speak:



'Macbeth, be careful of Macduff!  
That is my message – it's enough.'

Then the head disappeared. The witches spoke some more magic words, and a second spirit came. The second spirit had this message for Macbeth:

'Macbeth, be brave and laugh to scorn<sup>1</sup> The power of man. No man of woman born Can hurt Macbeth.'

The second spirit disappeared. The witches spoke their magic words again, and a third spirit appeared. The third spirit said:

'Macbeth will never be defeated until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane Hill and fights against him.'

Macbeth considered the three messages of the spirits.

'They say that I should be careful of Macduff,' he thought. 'But Macduff is a man, and they say that no man born of woman can hurt me, so that must mean that Macduff can't hurt me! They say I can't be defeated until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane Hill to fight me. No one can command a wood to fight, so that must mean that I will never be defeated! These messages give me



1. **scorn** : despise.



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courage.'

'You have done well,' he told the witches, 'and I am happy with what you have told me. But there is one other thing I want to know. You told Banquo that his children's children would be kings – is that really true?'

When they heard this question, all the witches shouted,

'Ask no more! Ask no more!'

Macbeth became angry.

'I must have an answer!' he shouted. 'Tell me the truth – will Banquo's family be kings after me?'

The witches stopped dancing. Then they sang together:

'Show the future, break his heart,

Then we witches will depart.'

Macbeth looked, and out of the cooking-pot he saw a figure appear – it was Banquo! Then he saw a line of kings standing next to Banquo. All of the kings had the same face, and they all looked at Macbeth. Banquo smiled at Macbeth, and then he pointed at the kings. Slowly the image disappeared.

Macbeth put his head in his hands. He was in despair<sup>1</sup> now. So it was true what the witches had said before, that Banquo's family would be the future Kings of Scotland!

'All my crimes for nothing!' he thought. 'Banquo's family will be kings after me, and no one will remember Macbeth!'

1. **in despair** : desperate, miserable.



*Out of the cooking-pot he saw a figure appear – it was Banquo!*



## Comprehension

**1** The witches tell Macbeth not to speak to the spirits because:

- a.  human beings cannot speak directly to spirits.
- b.  it is dangerous to speak to spirits directly.
- c.  they already know his thoughts.
- d.  Macbeth is not important enough to speak to spirits.
- e.  they would not answer him.

**2** Macbeth receives four messages from the spirits. Two of the messages make him happy, and two of them make him unhappy. Which are they?

Messages which make Macbeth happy	Messages which make Macbeth unhappy

**3** ‘All my crimes for nothing!’ What does Macbeth mean by this?

## Vocabulary

**4** The words on the left come from the text. Use a dictionary to match them with their synonyms on the right.

- |               |                  |
|---------------|------------------|
| a. scream     | 1. repugnance    |
| b. permission | 2. chief         |
| c. wicked     | 3. charm         |
| d. disgust    | 4. damage        |
| e. magic      | 5. authorisation |
| f. master     | 6. evil          |
| g. hurt       | 7. screech       |

## Grammar

**5 Put the conversation between Macbeth and the witches into reported speech.**

e.g. 'What are you doing?' he asked. 'What kind of magic is this?'

*He asked them what they were doing and what kind of magic it was.*

a. 'We can't tell you,' one of the witches replied.

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b. 'I have come here,' Macbeth told them, 'to ask you something. You must tell me the truth!'

.....

.....

c. 'Ask us your question,' the first witch said to Macbeth.

.....

d. 'We will answer,' the second witch said.

.....

e. 'If you don't trust us,' the third witch said, 'our masters will come to answer your question. Would you prefer that?'

.....

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f. 'Call your masters,' commanded Macbeth. 'I want to see them.'

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.....

**FCE 6** For questions 1-6, complete the second sentence so that it has a similar meaning to the first sentence, using the word given. Do not change the word given. You must use between two and five words, including the word given. There is an example at the beginning (0).

0. The government raised taxes because they needed more money for the health sector.

**order**

The government raised taxes ..... *in order to get* ..... more money for the health sector.

1. They weren't old enough to get into the nightclub.

**were**

They ..... into the nightclub.

2. They are building a new motorway between London and Bristol.

**is**

A new motorway ..... between London and Bristol.

3. I will take an umbrella because it might rain.  
**in**  
 I will take an umbrella ..... rains.
4. 'Tomorrow at this time we will be flying to Australia,' she said.  
**flying**  
 She said that the next day at that time ..... to Australia.
5. I prefer reading biographies to reading novels.  
**would**  
 I ..... read novels.
6. Both Daniel and Sam disliked the film.  
**liked**  
 Neither ..... the film.

## Listening



- 7** You will hear a conversation between a teacher and students. Listen carefully and decide if the statements below are true (T) or false (F).



- |  | T                        | F                        |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Jenny doesn't think the first message is clear.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Richard disagrees with Jenny about the first message.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Richard thinks that Macduff can't be dangerous.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Jenny thinks that the third message about Birnam Wood coming to Dunsinane Hill means that Macbeth will be defeated. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. Richard thinks that the first message is the clearest.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. The final message is that Banquo will become king.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

## Speaking

- 8** Look at the messages from the spirits again. What do *you* think they mean?
- 9** What do you think happens next in the story?