

Character analysis: The Witches

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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'). 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) 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' and curses him with a tortuous inability to sleep, declaring 'He shall live a man forbid' and that he shall 'dwindle, peak and pine'. 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.

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' – echo the Witches' chant, 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair', from Act 1, Scene 1.

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.

When Macbeth and Banquo meet the Witches, their reactions give us an important insight into their personalities. Banquo is unafraid, but Macbeth 'start[s]', or flinches, and 'seems rapt', 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' 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'.