



A DEED WITHOUT A NAME

Macbeth Act IV Scene I
Witchcraft and Magic in Elizabethan England



THE SETUP - Macbeth meets the Witches, and he and Lady Macbeth plan the murder of Duncan

ACT I



ACT II

THE MURDER - Macbeth and Lady Macbeth carry out the murder, and place the blame on the chamberlains, and on Duncan's sons, who both flee.



BANQUO'S GHOST - Banquo is suspicious ; Macbeth has him killed, only to be visited by his Ghost at the feast.

ACT III



ACT IV

THE WITCHES' PREDICTIONS - Macbeth goes to the Witches again, and is led to believe he is invulnerable; Macduff rallies to Malcolm in England.



ACT IV SCENE I

"SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES ..."



A DEED WITHOUT A NAME

Witchcraft: Macbeth seeing the three witches, with other horrifying visions. Etching after J. Reynolds, ca. 1786-1790

FIRST : Re-read the scene of Act IV Scene I. The Witches make their wicked brew, and Macbeth visits them again to gain insight. The scene is available, with notes and many other resources, here :

http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/macbeth_4_1.html



The Witches in *Macbeth* (Kurzel, 2015)

Examine once more the depiction of the Witches in the Kurzel version of *Macbeth* which we watched in class, here :

<https://youtu.be/K5TpecxZL88>

What can you say about how they are presented to us?

Try to think about the following questions:

- Are the Witches in the 2015 film clearly supernatural?
- If they ARE, what is the evidence for this?
- If they are NOT, then who could they be? What could their aim in giving their predictions to Macbeth be?
- What is the effect of having the little girl with them? (remember, she shows up in the scene where Fleance escapes the murderers)
- Do you remember the version of Act IV Scene I, where Macbeth goes to consult them again? He starts in his bedroom, and then appears in the Highlands, on a horse, still in his nightshirt ... What could this imply about the reality or otherwise of his experience?

ACT IV SCENE I

A cavern. In the middle, a boiling cauldron.

[Thunder. Enter the three Witches]

First Witch Thrice the brinded cat hath mew'd.

Second Witch Thrice and once the hedge-pig whined.

Third Witch Harpier cries 'Tis time, 'tis time.

First Witch Round about the cauldron go;

In the poison'd entrails throw.

Toad, that under cold stone

Days and nights has thirty-one

Swelter'd venom sleeping got,

Boil thou first i' the charmed pot.

ALL Double, double toil and trouble; 10

Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.

Second Witch Fillet of a fenny snake,

In the cauldron boil and bake;

Eye of newt and toe of frog,

Wool of bat and tongue of dog,

Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting,

Lizard's leg and owlet's wing,

For a charm of powerful trouble,

Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.

ALL Double, double toil and trouble; 20

Fire burn and cauldron bubble.

Third Witch Scale of dragon, tooth of wolf,

Witches' mummy, maw and gulf

Of the ravin'd salt-sea shark,

Root of hemlock digg'd i' the dark,

Liver of blaspheming Jew,

Gall of goat, and slips of yew

Silver'd in the moon's eclipse,

Nose of Turk and Tartar's lips,

Finger of birth-strangled babe 30

Ditch-deliver'd by a drab,

Make the gruel thick and slab:

Add thereto a tiger's chaudron,

For the ingredients of our cauldron.

ALL Double, double toil and trouble;

Fire burn and cauldron bubble.

Second Witch Cool it with a baboon's blood,

Then the charm is firm and good.

THE WITCHES' BREW – Double Double Toil and Trouble

This is the famous scene of the Witches gathered round their cauldron, adding horrible ingredients to their brew, to create some kind of terrible spell. It is one of the enduring images of Witchcraft in our culture.

What do the ingredients have in common? What do you think their spell is for?

To what extent is the Supernatural present in the play in general? Is it "real"?

- First of all, consider the Witches : the play starts with them, and they are perhaps the generators of the "inciting incident" of the plot : they predict that Macbeth will be Thane of Glamis (already true), Thane of Cawdor (comes true very soon after), and "King hereafter" ... Which finds an answering thought of murder and usurpation in his mind, and perhaps even more so in Lady Macbeth's mind. They seem to have the power of prophecy, and they certainly are presented as Uncanny "Wyrd Sisters" : "wild and withered in their attire", eldritch looking, unearthly.
- In the scene we are looking at now, Act IV Scene I, they perform a ritual enchantment with strange and horrible ingredients thrown into a cauldron, and they provide Macbeth with visions and predictions (he sees the "Apparitions", an Armoured Head, a Bloody Child, and a Baby Crowned and Holding a Tree, and they give him cryptic predictions that appear to guarantee his invulnerability, but which end up being perversely true ...)
- Consider also Lady Macbeth's invocations of "all you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts", to take away her gentleness and femininity and fill her "top full of direst cruelty". She speaks several times of unholy powers to whom she dedicates herself, and whom she petitions for power and favours.
- Then there are the visions that Macbeth sees elsewhere: the Dagger floating in front of him pointing the way to Duncan's murder, Banquo's Ghost at the feast.
- QUESTION : are there possible rational explanations for all these things? Does Shakespeare come down on the side of Rationality, or of the Supernatural being real in this play? How can you support this answer?



Superstition and the Supernatural

In today's Western World, science, rationality, empiricism, and materialism all seem to have the upper hand ... It is considered immature, crazy, or unsophisticated to believe in the Supernatural ...

But are things so clear cut as all that?

Superstition Checklist :

- Do you believe that dreams can predict future events?
- Do you believe that there is life after death?
- Do you believe in a Higher Power? (God, or your own version of it)
- Do you believe that certain things are "lucky" or "unlucky"?
- Do you believe in signs or meaningful coincidences?
- Do you believe in astrology, or that the stars and planets can somehow influence our lives?
- Do you believe in Fate, Destiny, or that certain things were "meant to be"?
- Do you believe that people can have unexplained powers, such as a Sixth Sense, telepathy, clairvoyance, ability to cast spells, put curses on people, heal them or other wise affect them?
- Do you believe in ghosts, spirits, angels, demons, or fairies?
- Do you believe in any version of karma or cosmic justice? (SEE NEXT SLIDE)

HOW DID YOU DO ON THE SUPERSTITION CHECKLIST?

If you answered “yes” to three or more of the beliefs on the list, congratulations! You might just be superstitious!

And in so being, you join the vast majority of people for 95% of human history, and still in today’s world, most of the world’s population! (even in developed countries, over 50% of people believe in one or more of these things!)

You would think that people with a background in science would be *less* likely to be religious or superstitious, but in fact there is a *higher* incidence of belief in God and the paranormal among doctors, high level physicists, and other “science-y” professions than there is in the general population!

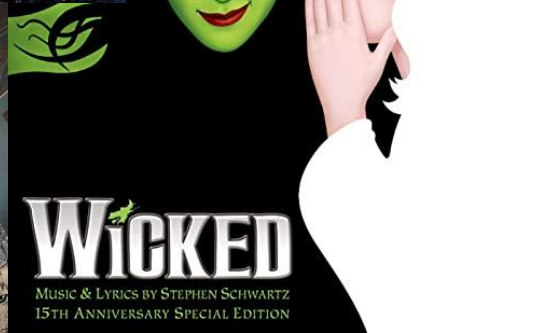
People the world over, up until the Enlightenment (18th century), would have considered it unthinkable to conceive of a world without gods, spirits, demons, and all sorts of other invisible powers and forces. Atheism, materialism (the belief that only the physical “exists”), and rationalism are all very modern innovations! The Unseen World was as real as the Visible World to more or less every other culture that came before our own.



WITCHES AND THE SUPERNATURAL IN TODAY'S WORLD

Witches, astrology, tarot, herbalism, alternative medicine, energy healing, magic, the occult, paganism ... All of these things are having a surge in popularity these days, in pop culture and society. Some people have a theory that in unsettled times politically, the Supernatural makes a comeback!

**WITCHES
HAVE
THEIR
POP
CULTURE
MOMENT**



WITCHES IN SHAKESPEARE'S BRITAIN

In the Elizabethan and Jacobean Eras (late 16th and early 17th century Britain), what we now call the "Early Modern" Age, belief in witches was widespread.

People were very strongly religious, and almost everybody believed in God, the Devil, spirits, angels, demons, fairies, and other supernatural creatures. They believed that it was possible to perform magical acts, to harm or help others or to affect oneself. They also believed that interactions with supernatural beings could grant these powers.

What is a witch?

- A witch was believed to be a magical practitioner who used her power to harm others (or his! Though our cliché of a witch is a woman, there were many men also believed to be witches. One name for a male witch is "warlock", which means "oath-breaker"). The Church taught that witches were in league with the Devil, and may even have sold their souls to him. Some witches did in fact believe that they gained their power from the Devil or other demons. Others believed that they got them from fairies with whom they had a special bond.
- There were also "good" magicians, who used their powers to help people. Some examples are the Cunning Folk in Britain, who sold their magical services, and the *Benandanti* in Italy, who used their powers of magical flight to battle against witches and so to save their villages' crops from disease.

THE WITCHCRAFT ACTS

The Witchcraft Acts - Laws Against Witches

1542: It is a serious crime to use witchcraft for any unlawful purpose

1563: It is a serious crime to invoke evil spirits and to practise magic if someone is killed

1604: It is a serious crime to ‘consult with, entertain, employ, feed or reward any evil or wicked spirit’. Magic becomes a crime that is punished by death.

These Acts show that during Shakespeare’s time, there was a growing belief in the threat posed by witches to civil society. Thus, in *Macbeth*, the presence of the witches shows them stirring up violence and rebellion, and posing a threat to the social order.

Macbeth was written especially to appeal to the king at the time, James I (he had been James VI of Scotland, until he was chosen as king of a unified “United Kingdom”)



James I was obsessed with witches - he even wrote a book about them!

***Daemonologie* by James I of England.**

Author: James I was an intelligent man who took a special interest in the subject of witchcraft and witches. The hunting of witches was well respected long before James I came to the throne. Despite the high number of witches being executed in Europe during Elizabeth's reign, very few were executed in England. This all changed when James took the throne.

James was very superstitious. In Scotland he took part in a number of witch trials and many were executed. In 1597, he published a book on the topic of witches called *Daemonologie*.

The book: James declared that witches were very real and that they were doing the work of the devil. He stated that witches were able to conduct special "charms" which could heal but also harm. Books on witchcraft were very popular at the time because there was a strong belief that witches actually existed.



Witches were believed to travel to a meeting place (often on a hill or in the wilderness) for a "Sabbat" - a feast where they would meet the Devil and commit all sorts of atrocious acts, including cannibalism and infanticide

Witch spotting guide: James also included a list which would allow the reader to spot a witch. It was believed that witches were very common and that they were hiding amongst everyday people.

Characteristics of a witch: According to the book the following list allowed the reader to spot a witch:

- the person does not know, or cannot say, the Lord's Prayer.
- they may have a familiar to help them in their evil work, such as a cat, bird or toad.
- they may have a "witch's mark" - a lump or mark on her skin where she feeds her familiar with her own blood (sometimes imagined as an extra nipple)
- they can hurt people by giving them "the evil eye"
- they make curses or say that they will harm people
- they have no shadow
- they make special medicines from plants and other items
- they have friends who are known to be witches
- they live alone, away from people

In this way, many solitary women were targeted as witches, especially those known for administering herbal medicine or helping women with contraception and childbirth.



The Witch Trials

As the laws against witches became more stringent, England followed many other European countries (including Scotland) in seeking out witches and subjecting them to torture to get them to confess - and often executing them for their crimes.

The Witch Trials

People believed to be witches were persecuted increasingly all over Europe in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries.

There are many theories as to why this is : religious and political turmoil may have led to paranoia ; famine and plague and crop-failure caused people to seek a scape-goat for their misery ; ergot poisoning (a fungus that grows on rye) may have caused people to hallucinate and act irrationally, which was later blamed on witches. Silvia Federici proposes the theory that increasing enclosure of common land, and the beginnings of a move towards capitalism necessitating a crack-down on women's independence and that of marginal figures in society : her theory is that the witch trials were a form of state repression and consolidation of wealth.

People suspected of being witches were interrogated, often with the use of torture. Paradoxical treatment was common, for example (as pictured) suspected witches would be "ducked" in water. If they floated, they were witches, and so burned to death. If they sank, they were innocent!

Other treatment includes being stripped in public to look for the "Devil's Mark", being stuck with pins, being flogged, sexually assaulted, and, finally, being put to death if found guilty : in Continental Europe most often being burned at the stake, in Britain, more commonly being hanged ...



NOW OVER TO YOU...

In response to this lesson, I would like to invite you to go back to the questions asked on the slides about *Macbeth*, particularly the following: "To what extent is the Supernatural present in the play, and is it 'real'?" Please write your answers to these questions as a response to this lesson (about 250-300 words, or one typed page). Don't worry too much about structure or style here ; this is a spontaneous response, which takes the place of in-class discussion : just write your thoughts on the questions, those that inspire you, and particularly that last one.

I would also like you to use this lesson as a jumping off point for a Bac Written Expression style short essay. You may use either one of the following writing prompts : (250-300 words)

1. Imagine you have been condemned as a witch in 17th c. England. Write EITHER your denial OR your confession to the charges!
2. Do you believe in the Supernatural? Why or why not?