

E-CONTENT PREPARED BY

Dr Ramit Das

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Durgapur Government College, Durgapur, West Bengal

(Affiliated to Kazi Nazrul University, Asansol, West Bengal)

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E-Content prepared for students of

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English

Name of Course:

Shakespeare

Topic of the E-Content

Witchcraft in *Macbeth*: A Study Guide

Department of English, Durgapur Government College

Level: Undergraduate; Semester-II (Hons.)

Paper: *Shakespeare* (CC-3), Unit II: *Macbeth*

Module 1: Dr Ramit Das

Module 1

Witchcraft in *Macbeth*: A Study Guide

1. The witches appear in **four** scenes of *Macbeth*:
 - a) **Act I Scene i** (the opening scene)
 - b) **Act I Scene iii** (the scene in which the witches meet Macbeth and Banquo after the battle and utters the three prophecies—both to Macbeth and to Banquo [**memorize the three prophecies to Macbeth and Banquo: very important for short questions for your examination**])
 - c) **Act III Scene v**: Hecate’s meeting with the witches and her rebuking them for meeting with Macbeth without her permission
 - d) **Act IV Scene I** (the **Cauldron Scene**: Macbeth’s visit to the witches for the last time in the play and their predictions—**he is told to beware of Macduff, he is assured that no person born of a woman can harm him and he need not worry until Birnam Wood came to Dunsinane hill**. All of these are “imperfect’ predictions as Macduff was born of a Caesarean operation, he was “untimely ripped” from his mother’s womb and the British army led by Malcom used the branches of trees of Birnam Wood to camouflage themselves when they approached Dunsinane Hill so that it appeared that the wood was travelling towards the hill. Macbeth, however, is taken in by these assurances and only later realized the “**equivocation**”—saying one thing and meaning another--practiced by the witches.
2. **Shakespeare’s sources of witchcraft**
 - Holinshed’s *Chronicles* (chief source)

ii) Holinshed says: "...the common opinion was, that these women were either the **weird sisters** (**weird** →English word "**wyrd**" meaning **fate** or **destiny**, signifying the **Fates of Greek or Scandinavian mythology**) that is (as ye would say) the Goddesses of destiny or else some nymphs or Faeries." Shakespeare somewhat deviates from this portrayal of the witches in this play. To a certain extent, he retains the elemental, terrible, mysterious quality of the witches; on the other hand, he presents them as foul and filthy hags with choppy fingers, skinny lips, withered lips and beard with vulgar spite in accordance with English and Scottish folklore.

This is a very important aspect of Shakespeare's presentation of the witches in *Macbeth*: neither are they completely like the witches of folklore, nor are they completely the Fates. As S.C. Sengupta says, ' " Too Norn-like to be witches, too witch like to be Norns" they are a little of both without being either the one or the other. And in this lies their fascination for us.'

3. Another important point regarding the witches

They have power over Nature and to a certain extent over Man's soul, but that power is **not absolute**. As the third witch mentions in Act I Scene iii, the sailor's boat can be "**tempest-tossed**" but it cannot be "**lost**", implying that their power is limited. Similarly, they can only "influence" a person, they do not have final sway over him. They prophesize Macbeth becoming the king but they do not speak of **murdering** the king. Moreover, they cannot trouble Banquo because he is innocent.

4. Why Witchcraft? Why does Shakespeare introduce the witches in his play?

- a. **The issue of topicality**: The period of 1550 to the end of the seventeenth century was an age of witch hysteria, accompanying by rigorous witch hunts. Thousands of individuals, mostly (innocent) women were conjured of practicing witchcraft—being in league with Satan and causing injury or damage to people—and executed during this period. A number of treatises, as we have seen, were written on this topic with the king himself taking a keen interest in witchcraft trials. On August 7, 1606, *Macbeth* was first performed for King James I. In such a situation, any play dealing with witches was bound to strike a chord among the audience.



King James VI of Scotland (seated, right) supervising the torture of witches in Edinburgh, detail of a woodcut from the 1591 pamphlet *Newes From Scotland*.

Picture Credit: <https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/history-and-civilisation/2019/10/royal-obsession-black-magic-started-europes-most-brutal-witch>

- b. More importantly, the witches serve to build up the atmosphere of the play and strike the key-note of the play. They typify the foul, morally topsy-turvy, anarchical universe of *Macbeth* where “good things of day begin to droop and drowse” and “night’s black agents to their preys do rouse”.

As S.C. Sengupta says, “*Take off from the play its peculiar atmosphere and what remains of the tragedy? Take away from the witches and what remains of its atmosphere?*”

5. **Witchcraft/witches in three film adaptations of *Macbeth*, with particular emphasis on the opening scenes**

- a) **Macbeth.1948. Directed by Orson Welles**

YouTube link of Opening scene: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L-NVL8YvfiY>



Picture credit: <https://jonathanrosenbaum.net/2021/12/orson-welles-macbeths-tk/>

b) **Macbeth.1971. Directed by Roman Polanski**

YouTube link of Opening scene:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJWTPWwuDQc>

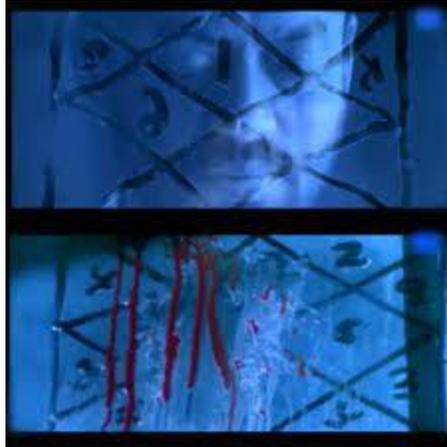


Picture Credit: <https://sites.google.com/site/aesmacbeth7/act-i-scene-1-matt/up-is-down>

c) **Maqbool. 2003. Directed by Vishal Bhardwaj**

YouTube link of Opening scene:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AWriwPaBbbY>



Picture credit: <https://hotaruramjas.wordpress.com/2020/08/19/the-two-witches-of-maqbool/>

Books for Further Study

- 1) S.C. Sengupta, ed. *Macbeth*, 2nd Edition, A. Mukherjee & Co., Kolkata, 1981
 - 2) A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*, Macmillan, London, 1957
 - 3) Faith Nostbakken, *Understanding Macbeth: A Student Notebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents*, Greenwood Press, London, 1997
 - 4) G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespeare's Tragedy*, Routledge, New York, 1989
 - 5) David Elloway, *Macbeth: Macmillan Master Guides*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1985
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