

The Witches: agents of evil?

IAN JOHNSTON

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▲ Henry Fuseli, **The Three Witches**, 1788. Zürich, Kunsthhaus.

No discussion of *Macbeth* would be satisfactory which did not make some attempt to deal with its most famous symbols: the coven of witches whose interactions with Macbeth play such a vital role in his thinking about his own life, both before and after the murder of Duncan. Banquo and Macbeth recognize them as something supernatural, part of the landscape **but** not fully human inhabitants of it. They have malicious intentions and prophetic powers. And **yet** they are not active agents in the sense that they do anything other than talk and offer visions and potions. **So** what are we to make of them?

A good place to begin is treating them as vital poetic symbols in the play, essential manifestations of the moral atmosphere of Macbeth's world. The most obvious

interpretation of the witches is to see them as manifestations of evil in the world. They exist to tempt and torment people, to challenge their faith in themselves and their society. They work on Macbeth by equivocation, that is, by ambiguous promises of some future state. These promises come true, **but** not in the way that the victim originally believed. The witches **thus** make their appeal to Macbeth's and Banquo's desire to control their own future, to direct it towards some desirable ends. Banquo's importance in the play stems, in large part, from his different response to these witches. Like Macbeth, he is strongly tempted, **but** he does not let his desires outweigh his moral caution. Macbeth cannot act on this awareness **because** his desires (kept alive by his active imagination and his wife's urging) constantly intrude upon his moral sensibilities.

The witches, in other words, appeal to what Macbeth wants to believe. They say nothing about killing Duncan. In that sense, they cannot be the origin of the idea of the murder. **Hence**, these witches exist as constant reminders of the potential for evil in the human imagination. They have no particular abode and might pop up anywhere, momentarily, ready to incite an eternal desire for evil in the human imagination, the evil which arises from a desire to violate our fellow human beings in order to shape the world to our own deep emotional needs. It's important to note that the witches are not dealt with in this play. By the end, Macbeth has been defeated and killed, **but** the witches are still around, somewhere.

The witches thus exist as a permanent threat, not only to particular individuals but also to the human community. They exert their effect through the deepest desires of human beings to set aside their shared sense of communal values, and they deceive those who listen to them with equivocating promises: they punish those whom they successfully tempt by giving them what they want, by living up to their promises, only to reveal just how empty and self-destructive life becomes for those who surrender to their egocentric desires.

guided study

1. Highlight the main idea expressed in the passage. Try to explain the concept in your own words.

2. Look at the underlined linkers. Match each of them with its logic function: *consequence* (2), *contrast* (5), *cause* (1).

3. Answer the following questions.

1. What are the main features of the witches?
2. How do Banquo and Macbeth react to them?
3. Are the witches responsible for Duncan's murder?
4. Do the witches tempt only individuals?