BLOOMSBURY TEACHER GUIDE



MACBETH

BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



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CHAPTER 1
FAIR IS FOUL, AND FOUL IS FAIR
ACT ONE SCENE ONE

At a glance

- **Plot and character development:** Three Witches gather and plan to meet Macbeth.
- **Social and historical context:**
  - King James and the supernatural
  - Male performers
- **Vocabulary:** Malevolent
- **Big question:** Why does Shakespeare start the play with the Witches, rather than Macbeth?
- **Themes:**
  - Conflict
  - Fate vs free will
  - Appearance vs reality
- **Analysis:**
  - Text: trochaic tetrameter
  - Image: threes
  - Language: double-talk
- **Key quotation:** 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair'

Plot and character development

This first scene is one of the most famous in all of Shakespeare: the image of three witches gathering on stage is enduringly popular and mysterious. The entrance of these 'Weird Sisters' is announced by the sound of 'thunder and lightning', immediately suggesting their ability to raise storms.

The second Witch explains that a chaotic battle – a 'hurly-burly' – is ongoing. We learn later that this conflict is due to the invasion of Norwegian forces, aided by the treacherous Macdonwald.

The three Weird Sisters plan to see each other later in the same day, once the battle is over, when they will meet with Macbeth. From the very beginning of the story, the tragic hero is associated with the powers of darkness.

The Witches are then summoned by their familiars (Greymalkin and Paddock), and exit as mysteriously as they appeared.

Social and historical context

King James and the supernatural

Shakespeare could assume that his audience knew a lot about witches, because they were a real source of fear in Britain at the time. King James I was particularly fascinated and scared by them, documenting his views in his 1597 book *Daemonologie*. The book contains many details that Shakespeare includes in *Macbeth*: witches were reputed to have the power of prophecy, to be able to control the weather, to appear and disappear at random and to fly.

By selecting these supernatural figures to begin his play, Shakespeare tapped into major concerns of the period, guaranteeing that his royal patron would be interested. James was already a fan of Shakespeare's company: he became their patron within ten days of becoming king, renaming them The King's Men.

Male performers

In Shakespeare's theatre, all roles were played by male performers. Female characters were most often played by teenage boys whose voices had not yet broken. In *Macbeth*, it is likely that the Witches were played by adult actors rather than boy players, allowing them to appear more mysterious and alarming.

PAUSE POINT

S-T-R-E-T-C-H

Shakespeare draws on contemporary anxieties about the supernatural in order to explore the question of evil.

Triplet discussion: Does evil originate from forces external to humanity (like the devil), or is it part of the human condition?

- Student A: Argue that evil is a result of external forces.
- Student B: Argue that evil is part of the human condition.
- Student C: Summarise the discussion.

Model answer:

Shakespeare's exploration of the nature of evil allows the play to resonate down the ages. As we look at the history of the twentieth century, or even at the news today, we find evidence of immoral behaviour in human society. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare may present the Witches as a malevolent force, but the idea of killing comes from Macbeth himself. Perhaps Lady Macbeth's murderous thoughts are prompted by Macbeth's letter in Act One Scene Five, but her desire to be filled with 'direst cruelty' is her own. Even the loyal and virtuous Banquo has 'cursed thoughts' when he sleeps. Shakespeare suggests that although the Witches catalyse these treacherous thoughts and actions, evil itself is an inextricable part of the human condition.

Vocabulary | Malevolent

Teaching students to use the word malevolent can help them to articulate many ideas about the play – from Shakespeare's evocation of the Witches' malevolence, to his presentation of Lady Macbeth's appeal to the 'spirits' to fill her with malevolent 'cruelty'.

Definition:	**Morphology:**
An evil desire to cause harm to others.	Prefix: mal = bad e.g. malicious, malignant, malediction Root word: vol = wishing e.g. benevolent, volition

Examples:	Non-examples:
Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (1886): Stevenson presents Hyde as malevolent when he murders Sir Danvers Carew. *Othello* (1603): Shakespeare evokes Iago's malevolence when he poisons Othello's marriage.	*Of Mice and Men* (1937): Steinbeck does not present George's murder of Lennie as malevolent, because he does this out of care for his friend. *A Christmas Carol* (1843): By the end of the novella, Dickens presents Scrooge as a benevolent and caring man.

Reading the scene

- Introduce the full scene. You could read it aloud line by line, or show a film version from our list in Appendix C.
- Do a 'call and response' choral reading. You say a line and the students repeat it back to you. Ask students what they noticed about the feel of the rhythm and the dramatic power of chanting in unison.
- Next, divide the class into three large groups, each group playing one of the Witches.
- Read the scene again. Direct each group's reading.
- Read the scene a few times, varying speed, pitch and tone.

Big question

Why does Shakespeare start the play with the Witches, rather than Macbeth?

It is perhaps surprising that our title character does not appear in the first scene. Instead, the audience is confronted with three strange figures who plan to meet with him.

By starting the play with these Witches, Shakespeare highlights their malevolent influence over Macbeth's story. They set the play's tone and atmosphere; this is a world in which supernatural events and visions may appear. The Witches, and their mysterious connection to the weather and animals, are powerfully established in this short scene. Witchcraft operates as a motif, a powerful symbol of the play's central conflict: the violation of the natural order. Witchcraft functions as a vehicle to explore the themes of ambition, of fate vs free will and of appearance vs reality. Witchcraft, in short, is a dramatic catalyst and a gateway to the major themes of the play.

Beginning with the Witches also allows Shakespeare to build up our preconceptions of the tragic hero. The Witches pronounce his name as if he is a well-known military hero associated with violence and war. This impression will be reinforced in the next scene, where we hear a captain's report of Macbeth's valiant deeds in battle. By elevating Macbeth's reputation, Shakespeare emphasises the height from which he will fall.

Themes

Conflict

In this short scene, Shakespeare establishes several conflicts. We learn that this story is set in a war-torn landscape, where armies vie for political power. This battle for ascendency is reflected in the stormy weather, implying conflict within the natural world. Shakespeare also sets up a tension between the Witches and Macbeth. They say that they will 'meet with' the tragic hero, using a word that also means 'attack' or 'ambush'.

Fate vs free will

Shakespeare's presentation of the three Witches evokes the three Fates – personifications of destiny in Greek mythology. The three Fates controlled the lives of every individual, whose fate was represented by thread running from a spindle. One spun the thread, one measured it out and one cut it: thus, the Fates were responsible for the entire lifespan of every person. Shakespeare is posing a question that is fundamental to the play: are our actions determined by fate, or do humans have the free will to act autonomously?

Appearance vs reality

The paradoxical declaration 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair' establishes a clash between appearance and reality as one of the play's most central themes. This inversion of moral and visual logic introduces a world of deceptive surfaces, where apparent loyalty masks real treachery, and prophecy conceals manipulation. The tension between appearance and reality will feature throughout the play – and this book.

Analysis

Text: trochaic tetrameter

The Witches speak in a language and a rhythm that is very rare in Shakespeare, a kind of rolling, rhyming style that sounds like they are casting spells. Their language often rhymes, but it is definitely not blank verse. This metre is called trochaic tetrameter, with four stressed syllables per line.

> *When shall we three meet again*
> *In thunder, lightning or in rain?*
>
> *Fair is foul and foul is fair:*
> *Hover through the fog and filthy air.*

Shakespeare often manipulates the rhythm of – and even the number of syllables – in a line. The examples above, which begin and end the scene, all have four stressed beats, but have between seven and nine syllables. Shakespeare most often uses this particular rhythm to indicate a supernatural element (see also the Fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Ariel in *The Tempest*). This striking rhythm immediately makes the Witches very different from the other characters in *Macbeth*.

Image: threes

Three was considered a very powerful, magical number, and Shakespeare manipulates it throughout the play. The Witches' rhymes, incantations and even the visions they present will all come in threes. (Think of other famous groups of three women and the influence they have!)

Language: double talk

From this very first scene, we get a sense that the Witches play with language and truth. Their final couplet proclaims that 'fair is foul, and foul is fair' – this paradox introduces how they will communicate in the play. What appears good may not necessarily be worth trusting, and as Macbeth will say later, 'nothing is but what is not'. This trickery in language will recur frequently throughout the play. It will combine neatly with antithesis and equivocation, which we explore in Chapter 15.

Key quotation | 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair'

This line is the unsettling, paradoxical foundation upon which the entire play is built. It establishes a world where appearances are deceptive and moral order is inverted. This principle immediately implicates Macbeth (who will echo it in his very first line) and it governs the play's core events: a seemingly loyal hero commits regicide, a welcoming hostess plots murder and a crowned king brings chaos. This line is the essential dramatic mechanism that propels the plot and corrupts the protagonist's perception of reality. This theme of appearance vs reality is integral to the entire play, and this line sums it up.

PAUSE POINT

CONSOLIDATION

Read-reduce-rehearse-remember (see 'How to use this book' page XIII). See online resources for a video demo of this activity.

In this scene, Shakespeare conveys the Witches' power; they are a malevolent and mysterious force, who use their supernatural abilities to throw Macbeth into chaos. Shakespeare's choice to include the Witches

is a nod to King James I, who wrote a book entitled *Daemonologie* and supported witch-hunting. Shakespeare presents the Witches as a catalyst of Macbeth's downfall as well as key players in the battle between good and evil, fate and free will.

Upon the stage

The opening image of the Witches is a directorial signature, setting the tone for the entire production:

- Orson Welles (1948) presented the Witches as actively malevolent forces, moulding a clay doll of Macbeth and crowning it.
- Trevor Nunn's intimate, studio production (first staged in 1976 and filmed for television in 1979) began by juxtaposing the ceremonial, masculine order of Duncan's court with the unsettling presence of the Witches, making disquieting noise as they communed. On a nearly bare stage, the sudden thunder and lightning came as shocking disruptions, making the supernatural feel immediate and psychologically threatening.
- Eve Best (2014) opened her production at Shakespeare's Globe with the full company on stage, drumming and moving to bagpipes. The Witches emerged from this 'hurly-burly,' suggesting that evil and disorder can erupt from the heart of society itself, especially in times of war.
- In a contemporary twist, Max Webster used binaural sound at the Donmar Warehouse (2023). Through headphones, the audience heard the Witches as disembodied, whispering voices all around them. By making them heard but never seen, the production activated the audience's own imagination and implicated them directly in the play's 'sound and fury'.

Consider these different stagings of the scene: are the Witches more disturbing if we only hear them, rather than seeing them at work?