

The Role of the Witches within the Play Macbeth

The play itself revolves around the struggle between good and evil. However, it becomes evident from the offset that the witches are the embodiment of malevolence. They not only create a sense of immense foreboding throughout the play, but are also crucial to the contribution toward Macbeth and Banquo's moral decline.

They establish a sinister atmosphere prior to Macbeth's introduction; declaring their intention of meeting Macbeth fills the audience with the knowledge that, from the outset, Macbeth's destiny is somehow linked with these malign creatures. This is reinforced by the fact that their paradoxical chants of "fair is foul and foul is fair" almost identically link with the initial words articulated by Macbeth: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen".

Upon hearing of their alluring prophecies, Banquo is struck by the nightmarish appearance of these agents of evil describing them as "instruments of darkness" while Macbeth simultaneously refers to them as "secret, black fiends". However, the witches tempt Macbeth by holding out the prospect of him becoming king, as they chant "all hail Macbeth! that shalt be kind hereafter". Thus, as Macbeth becomes further embroiled in the equivocal world of the witches, he, in turn, gives more credence to the "agents of evil" than does Banquo, and becomes hypnotically seduced by the alluring prophecies of the "imperfect speakers".

In my opinion, however, Macbeth is not merely a passive puppet on a string. In Elizabethan times, it was believed that a witch could not corrupt a person's soul but only draw out the evil that was in a person to make him damn himself. The witches contribute to Macbeth's downfall by merely exploiting the weakness that was already within him, putting the words on his "black and deep" desires of kingship.

However the witches later accelerate Macbeth's downfall by filling him with a sense of false security. Aware that "security is mortal chiefest enemy". Hecate deliberately sets out to draw Macbeth "on to his confusion". They make him feel invincible, stating that he will not be defeated until Birnam woods moves to Dunsinane hill and that he cannot be harmed by any man "of woman born".

Although an apparition warns Macbeth to "beware Macduff", the slaughter of Macduff's entire family is ordered by Macbeth out of pure free-will. However Macbeth realises too late the truth of Banquo's assessment of the witches as "instruments of darkness" when Macduff reveals that he was "from his mother's womb, untimely ripped". It is only then that Macbeth finally sees them for what they truly are: "juggling fiends who palter with us in a double sense".