

**MACBETH: A
WARNING AGAINST
SUPERSTITION**

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Macbeth: A Warning Against Superstition by Esther Gideon Noble

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BY

ESTHER GIDEON NOBLE



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MACBETH, A WARNING AGAINST SUPERSTITION

The great message conveyed by the tragedy Macbeth is a warning against superstition, or a perversion of the imagination. Shakespeare was so far in advance of his time that the greatest scientific truths were well known to him many years before they were hit upon by their so-called discoverers. That he believed in witches or supernatural agents of any kind is impossible. Shakespeare was essentially a dramatist. He was also an actor and a shrewd, practical business manager, who knew well how to catch the pennies of the "groundlings" and the pounds of the "judicious" *one*. His plays were written for presentation. Macbeth seems to have been written for immediate presentation. Shakespeare's policy was "to show the very age and body of the time his form and pressure," and "to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature." The Weird Sisters were treated

Macbeth

as positive objects, and introduced at the beginning of the play for dramatic effect, at a time when even the King and high dignitaries of state believed in them, when witches (so-called) were being legally burned at the stake, and no woman or man could be sure of immunity from arrest on a charge of witchcraft.

To admit the material existence of the Weird Sisters and that Macbeth was incited to murder by them would rob the play of its purpose, with which in view Shakespeare made Macbeth distinctly a man of thought, calculation and caution. *It is the abuse, the misdirection of this great power for thought which makes the tragedy.* The first words Macbeth speaks establish the fact that the witches are but an echo of his own thoughts. That they have said more than he does in this particular place is not significant. He gives the key to the situation by suggestion: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen." Macbeth has just won a great victory in battle;

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therefore, to him, the day is "fair." This victory has given life to a latent ambition. It was the fashion of the time for any one who entertained a hope to seek to have it confirmed by supernatural means. The time and place best adapted to such a purpose were a lonely spot and a tempest, for it was, according to popular belief, "in thunder, lightning and in rain" that supernatural agents most easily manifested. All this and the object of the visit of Macbeth and Banquo to the heath is told in the one word "foul."

During the course of the play it is shown that Macbeth's mind is steeped in superstition. There is not a single instance in which the witches do more than "harp" his "fear aright," or give utterance to a belief or idea which he does not entertain.

ACT III. SCENE IV.

"It will have blood, they say; blood will have blood;

Macbeth

Stones have been known to move and trees
to speak;(*)

Augurs and understood relations have
By magot-pies and choughs and rooks
brought forth

The secret'st man of blood."—

shows how he is imbued with old and then
popular superstitions.

ACT IV. SCENE I.

"I conjure(†) you by that which you pro-

(*) Note the superstition in regard to trees. Stones may
"move" but trees only "speak."

(†) I accent the word conjure on the first syllable and interpret and use it in the sense "to practice magical arts," advisedly. I quote the Clarendon Press Editors as authority for the statement that: "Conjure seems to be used by Shakespeare always with the accent on the first syllable, except in *Romeo and Juliet*, II.i.56, and *Othello*, I.iii.105. In both these passages he uses 'con-jure.' In all other cases he uses conjure whether he means (1) 'adjure' (2) 'conspire' or (3) 'use magic arts.'"

Troilus and Cressida: Act IV. Scene III.

Tro. Was Cressid here?

Ulyss. I cannot conjure, Trojan.

Tro. She was not, sure.

Ulyss. Most sure she was. (She must have been here because you saw her and I cannot conjure.)

Tro. Why, my negation hath no taste of *madness*.

Ulyss. Nor mine, my lord. Cressid was here but now.

(Macbeth not only believed he could conjure, but came to have the taste of madness.)

T. & C. Act II. Sc. III.

Theritesa. 'Sfoot, I'll learn to conjure and raise devils, but I'll see some issue of my spiteful execrations.