



*The Three Witches* by J. H. Fussli (1783).

# *The Dark Side of Shakespeare's Plays:* Revenge, Ghosts and Witches

## Revenge tragedies

*'Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.'* Hamlet Act, 1 scene V.

Medieval and Renaissance England were vengeful eras. Blood feuds were settled by a duel or other violent action. Private acts of revenge were justified if a wrong had been committed to a person or their family. Francis Bacon, a senior lawyer in the court of Queen Elizabeth, described revenge actions as 'a sort of wild justice' and the state under Queen Elizabeth I was keen to take control of the justice system. The Tudors wanted to replace blood feuds with a legal system and with bureaucracy, and eliminate the medieval code of private revenge, which had become a way of life for many people.

All revenge tragedy came from the Greeks, who wrote and performed the first organised plays. Later, it was the Roman playwright Seneca (ca. 4 BCE – 65 CE) who laid down the rules for revenge tragedies that were to become so popular in

the Renaissance period. Some of the Senecan devices which can also be observed in Elizabethan tragedies are the following: five act structure, the appearance of a ghost, and long rhetorical speeches.

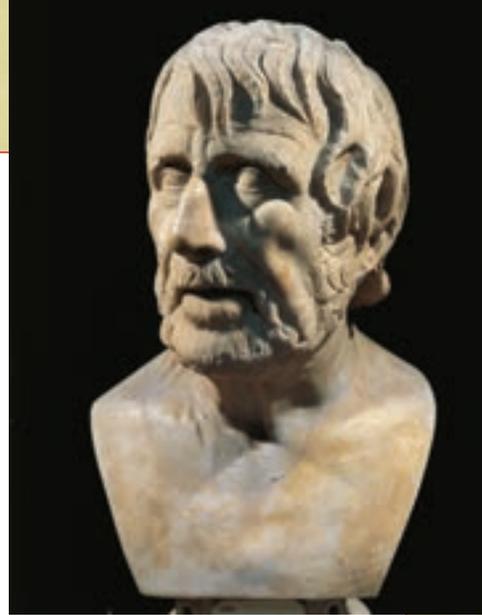
## Ghosts

In Elizabethan England people were superstitious and they believed that ghosts existed and penetrated daily life. They told ghost stories by the firelight in many households. Ghosts were also a popular theatrical device, and they often appeared on stage. Shakespeare often used ghosts to persuade their victims to take revenge on someone or to remember someone. There is a good example of this in *Hamlet*, where the ghost of King Hamlet calls for revenge.

We can distinguish two types of ghosts in Shakespeare's plays: the subjective or vision ghost is only visible to the person with whom it is directly connected. For example, Macbeth is the only one who sees the ghost of Banquo, and Richard III is troubled in his sleep by the spirits of those that he killed. On the other hand, the objective ghost, like Old Hamlet, presents itself to several people. Although Shakespeare took ghosts in his plays seriously, we cannot be sure if he believed in them. He used ghosts to reflect on our world, even if we can never be certain what they were trying to tell us.

## Witches

Women did not have any rights in Elizabethan society, with the exception of the Queen. They were expected to be obedient firstly to their fathers and then to their husbands. They could not go to university and only noble women were given a good education. Women could not become lawyers, doctors or politicians and they could not act on the stage. Women worked in the house while men travelled. There were 'wise women' in England, who lived in the countryside. They were medical professionals of their time with a great knowledge of plants and herbs. Some used herbs like mandrake <sup>1</sup> and hemlock <sup>2</sup> and they passed on their



Portrait of Seneca.

1. **mandrake** : a southern European plant. The root looks like the human body.
2. **hemlock** : a poisonous plant.

knowledge to their daughters. By the time Elizabeth came to the throne, these wise women were seen as witches and Elizabethans considered witchcraft to be devil worship. Single women and old women were often accused of practising witchcraft. The Catholic Church classed any woman with knowledge of herbs as a witch and even though monasteries had herb gardens and monks knew a lot about the power of herbs, they were never looked upon suspiciously.

Elizabethans and Jacobean blamed unexplained events such as deaths, bad harvests and fires as the work of witches. During the Elizabethan and Jacobean ages there were 270 witch trials.

One of the best examples of the representation of witches can be found in *Macbeth*. In *Macbeth*, the weird sisters or witches represent the dark side of the human psyche and man's constant struggle against the powers of evil. They tempt Macbeth and unlike Banquo, Macbeth is not able to think rationally. Time passes and Macbeth is influenced more and more by the witches. They put ideas into his head and the dark side of his character becomes twisted.

**1 Comprehension check**

Look at each statements. Is it correct or incorrect? If it is correct tick the box under A for YES. If you think it isn't correct tick the box under B for NO.

- |  | A                        | B                        |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 During Shakespeare's time, family disputes were rarely settled by private acts of revenge. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2 Queen Elizabeth I was not keen on having a justice system.                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3 The Greeks invented revenge tragedies.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4 All Shakespeare's ghosts appear to incite revenge.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5 All women in Elizabethan England could attend university.                                  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6 Women who used herbs to cure people of illness were called witches.                        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7 There were only a few witch trials during the Elizabethan and Jacobean ages.               | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |