Magic and superstition

We enjoy fantasy and magic in books, films and games today, but let's ask ourselves a question: did people in Shakespeare's time think in different ways from how we think today? Did they believe in different things from us?

One way of trying to answer these questions is to look at what people wrote at the time, and who better to look at than Shakespeare? In his time, in England, where he lived, nearly everyone was a Christian. Being a Christian then meant (and for some people still does mean) believing that what is written in the Bible is true; it also meant going to church at least once a week; and observing the Christian festivals throughout the year.

But when we look at what characters say in Shakespeare's plays, it seems as if many people also believed in things that aren't in the Bible. We have words for these, such as "superstition", "fantasy" and "magic". Maybe you believe in good luck or fate or think the signs

SHAKESPEARE WEEK

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of the zodiac tell you what kind of person you are. Do you believe it's unlucky to walk under a ladder? What about fairies and ghosts? Do you believe in them?

Two words that might help us here are "pagan" and "heathen". These words have been used to describe beliefs that are not Christian. The official view in Shakespeare's time was that these beliefs were wrong. Yet, at the same time, everyone knew that many people – perhaps most people – believed in such things as ghosts, fairies, magic, fate and luck.

Shakespeare was brilliant at writing about such pagan ideas. I also wonder if he thought that there was some kind of magic in his own writing. He was an actor as well as a writer, and he could see how people watching his plays shouted at actors playing a character as if it was real life: "Don't do it!" "Oh no, he's dead!" and that sort of thing. Is that a kind of belief in magic? Well, I would say, in a way, yes!

So through the magic of his writing, Shakespeare created scenes and characters that invite us to believe in fairies, ghosts, witches and the workings of strange forces. That's who and what you're going to meet now.

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Text

Michael Rosen's Pocket Shakespeare: A Beginner's Guide to the Best Bits of The Bard By Michael Rosen, illustrated by Chris Riddell

Magic and superstition

In the play *Macbeth* there are three witches. They are not like the witches we meet in fairy tales like *Hansel and Gretel*. These witches are magical sisters who can see the future. They can make spells to help them, and that is what they are doing in this speech. It's great fun to chant this or sing it, or say it like a rap. In *Macbeth* we get a sense that people believed in witches like this, but were also afraid of them.



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Magic and superstition

Double, double, toil and trouble;
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.

Fillet of a fenny snake
In the cauldron boil and bake.
Eye of newt and toe of frog,
Wool of bat and tongue of dog,
Adder's fork and blindworm's sting,
Lizard's leg and howlet's wing,
For a charm of powerful trouble,
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.

Double, double, toil and trouble;
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.

Cool it with a baboon's blood,
Then the charm is firm and good.

The Witches – *Macbeth*, Act 4 Scene 1



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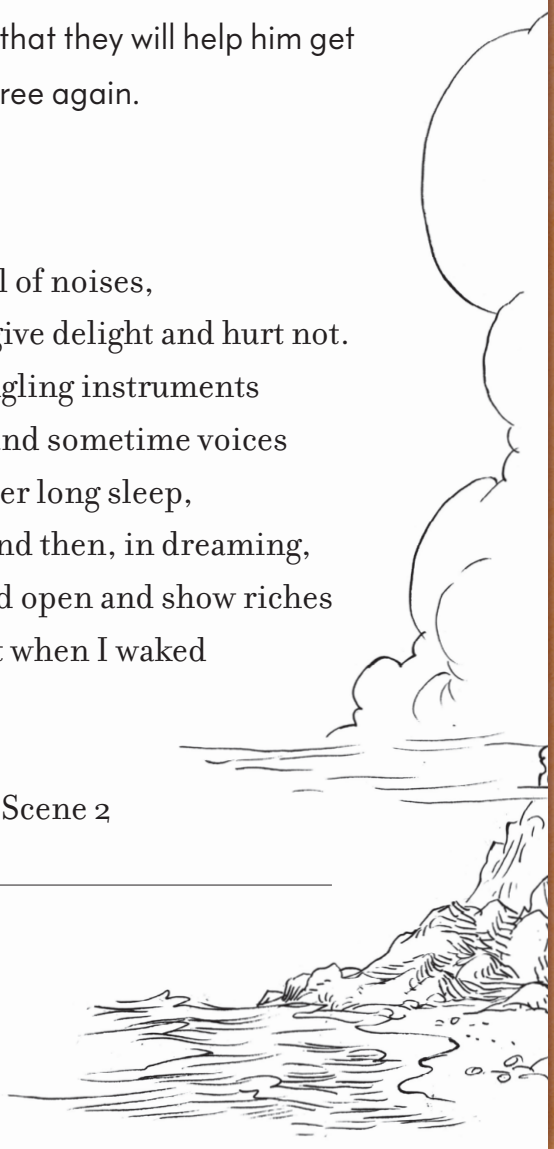
Magic and superstition

In the play *The Tempest*, there's a character called Caliban, who lives on an island. A duke called Prospero comes to the island, and enslaves Caliban. Prospero can make magic, but there is also something magical about the island itself.

Here Caliban is talking to two men who've come to the island. Caliban is hoping that they will help him get rid of Prospero so he can be free again.

Be not afeard. The isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again; and then, in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked
I cried to dream again.

Caliban – *The Tempest,* Act 3 Scene 2



afeard: afraid
methought: I thought

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Magic and superstition



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