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The Witches' Charmed Potion in Macbeth

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RESUMO: São analisados os ingredientes da poção encantada feita pelas Irmãs Sinistras (As Três Bruxas) na peça *Macbeth* de Shakespeare, segundo a classificação biológica de plantas e animais e pelos seus significados simbólicos.

Palavras-chave: 1. Shakespeare; 2. Macbeth; 3. Bruxaria.

ABSTRACT: The ingredients of the charmed potion made by the Weird Sisters (The Three Witches) in Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* are analyzed, following the biological classification of plants and animals and by their symbolic meanings.

Keywords: 1. Shakespeare; 2. Macbeth; 3. Witchcraft.

INTRODUCTION

The Fourth Act in Shakespeare's tragedy *Macbeth*, in its First Scene, begins with the well-known and always remembered verses that describe the charmed potion cooked in the cauldron of the Weird Sisters, i.e., the Three Witches.

Many interpretations of the components of the alluded potion had been proposed, but the vast majority deals only with the symbolic aspects of the elements throw in the mixture, most of them animals or animals' parts and plants.

Although some of those interpretations are solid grounded on tradition and even enlightening to the comprehension of the drama, we could not forget that this scene has a reputation of being a veritable account about witchcraft. (Braunmuller, 2003; Dickson, 2005)

We are not assuming here that this reputation is true, but, instead, that Shakespeare created an imaginary charmed potion based partially upon real animals and plants found in Nature, mainly made up with specimens from the British Isles that Scottish witches might come across.

The natural specimens were possibly chosen by its 'malignity' in terms of been poisonous or evil in accordance with common sense beliefs in Shakespeare's time, some of them associated with evident symbolic meanings; there are also in the potion parts of mythic or exotic animals chosen strictly by its symbolisms.

Beyond that, parts of human bodies were mixed in the compound as well, some of them regarding religious prejudices against Jews, Moslems, and barbarians.

Our goal in this essay is to analyze the ingredients of the witches' potion as shown in this scene of the play and to classify the animals and plants following the scientific nomenclature and also according its symbolic attributes.

THE CHARM

*FIRST WITCH: Thrice the brindled **cat** hath mewed.*



*Felis catus*¹

The domestic cat (*Felis catus*) announces the charm with its meow; considered one of the most faithful companions of the witches, the cat – in particular the black cat – is also taken as a popular representation of the Evil.

*SECOND WITCH: Thrice and once the **hedge-pig** whined.*



Erinaceus europaeus

¹ Almost all the images in this essay came from *Wikipedia* and they are used with the sole purpose of illustrate the animals and plants quoted in the play.

The 'hedge-pig', also known as 'hedgehog' (*Erinaceus europaeus*), is an animal with nocturnal habits and emits a sharp shriek when frightened, in this case, by the presence of the Evil.

THIRD WITCH: Harpier cries, "Tis time, 'tis time'.

*FIRST WITCH: Round about the cauldron go;
In the poisoned entrails throw.*

Toad, that under cold stone
Days and nights has thirty-one
Sweltered venom sleeping got,
Boil thou first i'th'charmèd pot.



Bufo bufo

Probably a reference to the 'common toad' (*Bufo bufo*) the most frequently found toad in the British Isles. The common toad is bigger than a frog and has a brown warty skin that secretes a poisonous substance.

*ALL: Double, double toil and trouble,
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.*

*SECOND WITCH: Fillet of **fenny snake**,*



Coronella austriaca

The 'fenny snake' is probably the 'smooth snake' (*Coronella austriaca*), the unique among the three species of serpents natives to the British Isles that hides itself in cracks on the ground, although it is non-venomous; it is a very secretive animal.

In the cauldron boil and bake:

Eye of *newt*, and toe of *frog*,



Salamandra salamandra



Triturus cristatus

The newt probably is an allusion to the 'great crested newt' (*Triturus cristatus*), the largest of the native species to the British Isles. It has a warty and

rough skin, with an orange-yellow belly blotched with black that resembles the color patterns of the 'salamander' (*Salamandra salamandra*), an animal with a mythic character, thought to originate itself from the fire.



Rana temporaria

The frog is probably the 'common frog' (*Rana temporaria*), a species native to the British Isles and disseminated in almost all Europe. It is typically brown or grayish in color but, unlike toads, secretes no venom.

Wool of **bat**, and tongue of **dog**,



Plecotus auritus

The bat refers probably to the 'common or brown long eared bat' (*Plecotus auritus*), which is the second most common bat species in Britain; it has a long soft fur that is grey-brown in color.



Canis lupus familiaris

The dog (image of the 'Cavalier King Charles Spaniel', a traditional English lapdog) is the most unusual of the ingredients of the potion; maybe its inclusion is due to its coprofilic tendencies.

Adder's fork, and *blind-worm's* sting,



Vipera berus

A reference made to the bipartite tongue ('fork') of the 'adder' (*Vipera berus*), the only poisonous snake native to the British Isles.



Anguis fragilis fragilis

The blind-worm, also known as 'slow worm' (*Anguis fragilis fragilis*) is a limbless lizard native to the British Isles. This species, like newts and all other lizards species, is able to autotomize, i.e., to shed its tail to slip from predators, but has no 'sting' and is non-venomous.

Lizard's leg, and howlet's wing,



Lacerta vivipara

Probably a reference to the 'common lizard', also known as the 'viviparous lizard' (*Lacerta vivipara*), because it gives birth to live offspring; unlike newts, lizards have dry skin.



Strix aluco



Tyto alba

The howlet refers probably to the 'tawny owl' (*Strix aluco*) or even to the 'barn owl' (*Tyto alba*). The tawny owl is the commonest owl species native to the British Isles and it is brown in color and has a big rounded head. The barn owl is very striking in appearance and, due to its silent flight, is also known as 'ghost owl';

it has a notable scream and also emits a hissing sound that resembles a snake. Both have nocturnal habits and live in woods as well in man-made structures. The howlet, 'the obscure bird', symbolizes Death.

*For a charm of powerful trouble,
Like a hell-broth, boil and bubble.*

*ALL: Double, double toil and trouble,
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.*

*THIRD WITCH: Scale of **dragon**, tooth of **wolf**,*



Dragon

The dragon is the only mythical animal that appears on the ingredients of the potion. According to literary tradition, its scales were considered poisonous. In the image above the dragon represents the *Ouruborus*, symbolizing the cosmic connection between the beginning and the end of time, i.e., eternity.



Canis lupus

The wolf is a reference to the 'grey wolf' (*Canis lupus*), which habitat comprehended all Europe.

Witches' mummy, maw and gulf

The 'witches' mummy' is a preparation for magical purposes, made from parts of dead human bodies.

Of the ravined salt-sea shark,



Isurus oxyrinchus

The shark is probably the 'large blue shark' or 'shortfin mako shark' (*Isurus oxyrinchus*), which habitat included the British coast. Nowadays it is almost extinct in those waters due to predatory fishing.

Root of **hemlock**, digged i'th'dark;



Conium maculatum

The hemlock (*Conium maculatum*) is a poisonous herb; from its root is made one of the strongest vegetal poisons known to man.

Liver of blaspheming Jew,

Religious prejudices against Jews came from the Church widespread belief that they were responsible for the murder of Christ. Furthermore, they were considered blasphemous for they denied that Jesus was the Messiah.

*Gall of **goat**, and slips of **yew**,
Slivered in the moon's eclipse;*



Capra aegagrus hircus

The goat (*Capra aegagrus hircus*) was considered an irascible and lustful animal, and a representation of the Devil himself.



Taxus baccata

The yew (*Taxus baccata*) is also a poisonous herb and was, traditionally, associated with death. The lunar eclipse was considered the best occasion to collect magical herbs for witchcraft.

*Nose of **Turk**, and **Tartar**'s lips,*

Moslems and barbarians were, like Jews, subject to religious prejudices.

*Finger of birth-strangled **babe**,*

The babe's finger is included because the child was not baptized as a Christian.

Ditch-delivered by a drab,

Make the gruel thick and slab.

*Add thereto a **tiger**'s chawdron*

For th'ingredience of our cauldron.



Panthera tigris

The tiger (*Panthera tigris*), an alien animal to the British Isles, symbolizes fierceness; it is proverbial for ferocity since antiquity.

ALL: Double, double toil and trouble,

Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.

*SECOND WITCH: Cool it with a **baboon's** blood,*



Mandrillus sphinx

The baboon (*Mandrillus sphinx*), also an alien animal to the British Isles, symbolizes wrath and lust; it has no cold blood, nor in the biological sense nor in the metaphoric sense. The property of its blood to cool the potion is explained through demoniac contradiction.

Then the charm is firm and good.

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