

William Blake. *Hecate*, c. 1795.

Color print, approximately 17 x 22.5 inches. The Tate Gallery, London.

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Hecate is a complex work that draws together allusions from Greek mythology, several of Shakespeare's plays, and Blake's own poetry. The three figures represent the tripartite nature of the goddess who in Greek mythology combined in her person aspects of the moon, earth and underworld, with power over the sky, earth and sea; she was also associated with witchcraft, magic and the supernatural. W .M. Merchant, Milton Klonsky and David Bindman relate the scene to sources in Blake's poetry, but the immediate allusion is to Shakespeare.

Hecate appears as a character in *Macbeth* when she and the three weird sisters brew their cauldron of "hell-broth":

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 blind-worm's sting,
Lizard's leg and owlet's wing,
For a charm of powerful trouble,
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble. (IV.i)

The bat, owl and snake in Blake's picture all furnish the ingredients for Hecate's brew. The ass perhaps takes us to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where Puck reminds us with an allusion to Hecate of the sinister aspects of his fairy world:

Now it is the time of night
That the graves all gaping wide,
Every one lets forth his sprite,
In the church-way paths to glide:
And we fairies, that do run
By the triple Hecate's team,
From the presence of the sun,
Following darkness like a dream,
Now are frolic: not a mouse
Shall disturb this hallow'd house:

I am sent with broom before,
To sweep the dust behind the door. (V.i)

But this is a side-long glance at the stuff of tragedy, and in this comedy Puck comes to banish the evil before Titania and Oberon arrive to bestow their blessings on the marriages that merrily ended the play.

Blake's illustration reminds us of two other dark allusions to Hecate in the plays; she figures in Lear's cursing of his daughters in Act I, Scene i of *King Lear*:

For, by the sacred radiance of the sun,
The mysteries of Hecate, and the night;
By all the operation of the orbs
From whom we do exist, and cease to be;
Here I disclaim all my paternal care,
Propinquity and property of blood,
And as a stranger to my heart and me
Hold thee, from this, for ever.

In *Hamlet* Hecate is again invoked as Lucianus pours the poison in the King's ear in "The Murder of Gonzago," the play within the play:

Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit, and time agreeing;
Confederate season, else no creature seeing;
Thou mixture rank, of midnight weeds collected,
With Hecate's ban thrice blasted, thrice infected,
Thy natural magic and dire property,
On wholesome life usurp immediately. (III. ii)

The dark, sinister nature of Hecate in Shakespeare's plays is distilled by Blake into this single depiction of the goddess, demonstrating what M. W. Merchant says is a characteristic quality of Blake's art where he adopts "a phrase or single moment in a Shakespearean scene" and then assimilates it to his own mythology (*Apollo* 320).

All the associations of *Hecate* are, as David Bindman suggests, "in Blakean terms, negative, implying the Female Will (Hecate herself), Mystery (the 'landscape' book), vegetative existence (the donkey), and the desires of divided humanity (the sinister creatures)" (*Art* 118). Martin Butlin first suggested in a 1957 catalogue for an exhibition of Blake at the Tate Museum that *Hecate* is a companion piece for [Pity](#) with the opposite nature of the two subjects "chosen to show two aspects of the place of woman in the Fall" (Merchant, *Apollo* 322), or, as Milton Klonsky puts it, the pictures of Hecate and Pity were "meant to illustrate dual aspects of what Blake regarded as the domineering Female Will, which attempts to ensnare the male in a web of religion woven out of sexual repression, chastity, and jealousy. 'O Woman-born / And Woman-nourish'd & Woman-educated & Woman-scorn'd!' he wrote in *Jerusalem*" (60).