Before the famous Salem Witch Trials in America, King James of England conducted a witch hunt of his own. People, predominantly women, were being sought out and killed under the guise of protecting England from "dangerous" witchcraft. According to 1600’s England, women were meant to be domestic figures staying in the home caring for their children and husbands. This image of a delicate domestic being was twisted in the age of witches and suddenly it was believed that women could somehow harness the power of domesticity to become witches. This incredible claim sparked a fear throughout the male population and King James himself. Witchcraft and the women behind it became a clear identifiable enemy to the throne, something the public used as a tool to place blame on nearly any woman who got in the way. This fear of women claiming anything for themselves caused a phenomenon of accusations of witchcraft, with the goal that this witch hunt would shrink women into the background and render them powerless again. The driving force behind such accusations was anxiety around the threat empowered women posed to men’s systemic power. James wanted to be seen as an absolute ruler, and the threat of women with any kind of power posed as an incredible threat.

James’s Encounter with Witches

James’ fear and fascination with witches began long before he became King of England. It actually started around the
time he got married in 1589. Young James was set to be married to Anne of Denmark. For the actual ceremony, Anne set sail to Scotland, but due to storms she was forced to seek shelter in Norway. In a grand romantic gesture, James set out to rescue the young woman who was now his wife by a proxy marriage. They encountered even more storms on their way back to Scotland, but eventually arrived safely.

Denmark was infamous for its persecution of witches, which piqued James’ interest. He then became convinced that witches conjured up the storms that endangered him and his new wife on their way to Scotland. In the witch hunts of the 1590s, James prosecuted women for attacking him with magic and weather, even presiding over some of these trials. The accounts of the trial of one of the accused, Agnes Sampson, appeared in Newes From Scotland—a published account of witch trials in North Berwick (University of Glasgow’s special collection page). Agnes was accused of being the head witch that bewitched the weather with the intentions of killing James on his return from Denmark. James’ obsession with witchcraft resulted in the writing and publication of Daemonologie (Linked here), a text which works to justify the trials and persecution of suspected witches in a Christian country.

Who was Responsible for the Witch Hunts: Church or State?

Long before the Salem witch trials, England’s witch hunts caused a stir among the church and state, causing changes in the law codes to be made over several monarchs and decades. The criminal prosecution of accused stemmed from the connection between church and state within the British government. It was widely believed that the King was divinely appointed to the throne by God, meaning the British government possessed divine power in and of itself. Since there was anti-religiosity and Satanic associations with witchcraft, accused witches during this time period were prosecuted by the government instead of just the Church. England passed its first statute against witchcraft in 1542, during the reign of Henry VIII, declaring witchcraft a crime punishable by death. This statute was then repealed in 1547 with the ascension of Edward VI to the throne. There was not another statute regarding witchcraft passed until 1563 under Elizabeth I, which divided witchcraft into different levels. These levels were made distinct by the amount of harm caused by the use of magical forces, each level begetting different punishments. The most severe crime was murder by the use of magic, which was punishable by death. James I, thought, broadened this statue, expanding corporal punishment to include crimes that involved causing harm to people, property, and animals, or reoffending witches.

The Anglican Church also dealt with accused instances of witchcraft outside of the court system. While the Anglican Church denounced exorcisms in 1552, priests could still be called to conduct dispossessions where they would ask for the intervention of God in removing demons from a person supposedly possessed by demons (called a demoniac). Following the English Reform, the Catholic Church used exorcisms and the fear of the supernatural as a conversion tool.

While to the public the title of “witch” was daunting and deadly, there were many women who realized there was power to be discovered and harnessed from the fear of the public. More often than not, women who were accused of being witches were those who had gained too much power in the eyes of men. However, what went unrealized by men (especially King James) was that women soon discovered the real power lay in claiming the title of witch in order to break free from social structures and to have power men had yet to understand or restrict. Scholars have noted that some women may have willingly submitted themselves to the courts as witches since testifying in open court was nearly the only way a woman could be heard, even though it would more likely than not bring about their execution. It begs the question, was there in fact more power waiting for women in embracing the title of witch in order to finally have access to
a platform for status and an individual identity without repression?

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**Did People Actually Believe in Witches?**

It’s hard to determine how many people believed in actual witchcraft/demonic possession as opposed to those who used the idea of witchcraft or possession as a method of persecution. The belief that supernatural forces were involved in human affairs was widely held: the debate, however, was, whether the forces were from God or the devil. Witches were an easy target to blame for unfortunate events like the death of farm animals, sickness, and bad harvests. Notable and educated people like King James I certainly believed in witchcraft. James even wrote *Daemonologie* ([Linked here](https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Saint_Mary's_College_(Notre_Dame_IN)/Humanistic_Studies_463%3A_Early_Modern___)) on the subject of witches and witchcraft. After his own personal experience with “witches” James not only embarked on a witch hunt of his own but felt it was necessary to justify this hunt and the trials that came with it. On the other hand, others such as Reginald Scot, author of *Discoverie of Witchcraft* ([Linked here](https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Saint_Mary's_College_(Notre_Dame_IN)/Humanistic_Studies_463%3A_Early_Modern___)), certainly did not believe in witchcraft and put a considerable amount of time and effort into debunking beliefs of witchcraft by claiming these “witches” were more magicians and tricksters than they were servants of the devil.

The overwhelming ambiguity of witches added to their association with demonic or fearful imagery, as there was no one clear way to determine if someone was a witch and whatever tests did exist varied from community to community. There was an ever-present threat of being attacked by a witch and any inconvenience from a child falling ill to a bad harvest could be interpreted as symptoms of a witch attack. While modern-day people might see these events as unfortunate occurrences of life, early modern Englishmen saw them as the work of the devil. Lacking a definitive culprit, blame for these events and others often fell on those who existed on the fringes of society—for example unmarried women.

The question remains: did the persecuted women actually practice witchcraft? Honestly, it’s hard to say. The documents used to study these trials were all written by those in power (i.e., the very men who were persecuting the accused witches). Some women did confess to practicing witchcraft, but many existing accounts are not reliable as there were usually other contributing factors to these “confessions”. Some may have participated in folk magic rituals and were caught by neighbors; others might have simply made enemies who accused them for political and social gain. However, no one can be certain since their lives and narratives have, unfortunately, been lost to history. (Spoto).

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**Witchcraft in Macbeth**

The witches or “weird sisters” in *Macbeth* reflect the ideas of witches at the time: they are deceitful persons who possess unknown and dark magic. In one of his Macbeth’s interactions with the witches after they have predicted Macbeth’s fate, he refers to their premonitions as “this supernatural soliciting” and says it “cannot be ill, cannot be good” but that it has “given me earnest of success” (1.3.130-133). These characters possess unspeakable yet nonetheless helpful skills, and when they harness their power it is both intimidating and telling. Macbeth uses the prophecies of the witches to plan his upheaval of the current leadership and yet remains weary of the witches’ power over him. Similarly it is possible that King James felt threatened by women trying to claim their domestic power and so he sparked the witch hunt as a way to ensure he remained absolute ruler.
Shakespeare makes the witches characters who both invoke fear and intrigue by including characteristics believed to be signifiers of witches in society. When the witches are first introduced in the play one says that they had been "killing swine", directly mirroring the belief at the time that witches harmed farm animals (1.3.99). While preparing and casting their spells the witches use gruesome ingredients such as a human thumb in order to bring about violence, even the image of a cauldron began as a harmless domestic tool until it was warped into a favorite instrument of witches (1.3.101-127). When introduced, the witches are casting a spell to make a sailor suffer because his wife did not fulfill one of the witch’s requests (1. 3.101-127). Shakespeare writes the witches to be incredibly powerful beings who use their power to get even or to manipulate people seeking to take advantage of them like Macbeth. This reflected what was a great fear of King James and therefore the people of England: that witches were vindictive and their evil spurned from grievances and their harnessing the power of domesticity.

Witchcraft in Performance

It is important to note that when this play would have first been performed on stage, women were not allowed to perform in any capacity. Every role would have been played by men who switched costumes and masks to assume different identities. So how does this ambiguity of the witches’ characterization continue over time as women were allowed to perform and the idea of performance took on several forms? Not only is there an air of mystery surrounding the gender of the witches, but as stage productions have evolved and the film industry was created so too did the witches evolve. Several different stage adaptations present the witches in various forms; the Royal Shakespeare company’s production had three small children dressed in identical pajamas play the witches, while other productions have the witches embody a more traditional “witch” look with torn and tarnished black robes. With the magic of film, the witches can inhabit nearly any form in modern media and several film adaptations have taken these characters above and beyond expectations. A film production in 2004 portrayed the witches as nuns working in a war hospital, while a film production in 2015 had the witches take the form of four women instead of the usual three—two of whom are young adults who carry one infant and one of whom is a small child.

Beyond the visual interpretations of the witches, there are some structural differences in the play, further separating them from the other characters. In an analysis conducted by the British Library, author Carol Atherton observed that the witches speak in a different meter than the other characters in the work. While other characters, including Macbeth, speak in iambic meter the witches speak in trochaic meter. What does this mean? It means that while other characters are speaking in alternating unstressed and stressed syllables, the witches are alternating stressed then unstressed syllables (Atherton). By starting their lines with stressed syllables, the witches come off as more aggressive and even foreboding, thus adding to their mysterious and somewhat terrifying image. This analysis also notes that there is a difference in number of syllables averaging in each line, the witches only average around four syllables while most of Shakespeare’s lines contain five syllables (Atherton). Lastly, Atherton notes that the witches speak in more rhymed couplets than other characters, making their dialogue sound more like a spell. These fundamental differences in speech are immediate ways to drive a barrier between the witches and the other characters, not only when people are reading the play but also seeing it performed are they able to notice right away there is a distinct difference in speech pattern between the “human” characters and these mysterious witches.