

HISTORICAL FACTS

The **1606** audience would have believed in witchcraft and sorcery. At the time, those who were considered witches would have been **persecuted and executed**. By including witches in the play, Shakespeare engages and intrigues his audience; they are watching on-stage a **man being tempted by evil**. It is frightening to see witches up close.

11th Century Scotland was a male-dominated / patriarchal society which ensured that **masculinity, honour and physical strength** in men were celebrated, valued and encouraged. It is a dark and dangerous time, difficult to survive in if you are not able to defend and protect yourself. Macbeth commands respect from others and quickly realises that if he is to gain and keep power, he needs to **play foully**.

King **James 1st was terrified and intrigued by witchcraft**. Macbeth was written with him in mind to teach audiences that **meddling in sorcery and devilry would lead to a person's downfall and punishment**. Macbeth's morals and mental state deteriorate at the same time, the **more evil** acts he commits, the **more brutal**, guilt-ridden and haunted he becomes.

James 1st of England (previously James 6th of Scotland) considered himself to be an expert on witchcraft. **During his reign**, the persecution of witches increased in Scotland and over **300 witches** were accused of trying to murder him using violent storms, casting spells and burning a wax effigy of him.

Shakespeare would have written the play to appeal to the values and beliefs of the reigning monarch. That there is a **divine right of kings**, and that to seize the throne is a terrible and evil crime against **all of humanity**.

The play would have appealed to the King and the audience because, at the end of the play, Macbeth is hunted down, defeated and killed for his crimes. **Good has won over evil.**



Elizabeth I 1558 - 1603



James I (formally, James VI of Scotland) 1603 – 1625



Macbeth 1606

William Shakespeare 1564 - 1616

Jacobean people were very religious and god fearing. However, they also believed in the existence of witches and witchcraft. In fact, the concept of witchcraft prevalent during this period was influenced by beliefs of the people belonging to the Tudor dynasty period.

Witchcraft was and is still normally associated with evil or something demonic and the people practising it are considered to have such dark powers. Jacobean people looked up the witches as a person who causes harms to others or who destroys property and causes menace. King James I strongly believed that witches and witchcraft existed.

After coming to power, he brought into effect an act of parliament which made witchcraft during Jacobean times an offence. Those who were found guilty of practising witchcraft were either awarded death or their property was seized. King James I also wrote a treatise on witchcraft during his reign.

The common belief among the masses was that it was mainly women who practised witchcraft. However, some sections also believed that men, although in smaller number, were involved in the activity. People were generally scared of those who they believed were the practitioners of witchcraft. It is also true that the alleged men and women who were involved in the activity of witchcraft were hunted down and killed, not by the government, but by normal people.

It was assumed that by doing so evil or bad things would be prevented. Torture was a common method adopted to extract confessions about the practice of witchcraft. These witches were even hanged to death as a means of punishment. In fact, the rate of persecution of the witches was extremely high during the Jacobean rule.