

A revelation of witchcraft in the elizabethan era history essay



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Witchcraft is the practice of spells and summons of spirits, which existed in most regions of the world throughout history. In the play Macbeth, written by William Shakespeare, the use of supernatural and witchcraft is one of the most interesting aspects of the play. During the Elizabethan era, the practice of witchcraft and the hunting of it were very common in Britain. Accusations against women practicing witchcraft led to severe conflicts in society and caused the loss of many people's lives. Reflected in the play Macbeth, witchcraft, the use of magic or supernatural faculties, could be traced back to the history of black magic, witch-hunt and King James' prominent involvement on the study of witchcraft.

Macbeth is set in Scotland in the Middle Ages, when witchcraft and magical spells, often associated with black magic, have passed on from generations to generations. Witchcraft, or black magic, is traditionally referred to as a pact between human and evil. As shown in Mildred Tonge's journal article, "the idea expressed in Macbeth is the fundamental idea of witchcraft and of Black Magic-the possibility of a link between mortals and a spirit-word which is evil" (Mildred Tonge). Witchcraft is a connection between people and evil spirits. In the play, the tragic character Macbeth allied with the witches in order to carry out his ambitions to become the king. Therefore, Macbeth has sacrificed his moral and conscience to make a contract with the evil powers, which eventually led to his tragic death. Analyzing from the other side of the spectrum, witchcraft, although most commonly perceived by many people as the practice of magical powers, is mere treachery and deception. Witches have only real power over people's mind, and all they use is cunning temptations to trick people into wrongdoings. As revealed by Reginald Scot

in his book, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, "at this day it is indifferent to say in the English tongue, 'she is a witch,' or 'she is a wise woman'" (Reginald Scot). The witches do not really have superior power, but are rather expert in using persuasion and other means of trickery that direct people into crime and evil deeds. In *Macbeth*, the main factor that leads to Macbeth's betrayal of the king is the witches' persuasions that try to ignite his evil intention to kill the king and take the throne. Unfortunately, the true nature of witchcraft was never revealed, and the fear of it lasted for years, which eventually led to the witch-hunt.

In Shakespeare's time, witch hysteria erupted in Britain. People began the witch-hunt, or the search for witches or evidence of witchcraft, many of which often included cruel punishment and inhumane torture. Since witchcraft is nearly "impossible to prove," it could evoke "the maximum of horror - meant that it could be used to punish any form of protest and generate suspicion even towards the most ordinary aspects of daily life" (Silvia Frederici). Fear was the controlling force that led to the hunting of witches. Due to people's overwhelming terror of witchcraft, thousands of people were killed, often burned to death in the 16th and 17th century. At the same time, because of the relatively poor living conditions and high death rate caused by pandemic, people almost blamed everything on the witches. Punishments to those people were extremely painful and merciless. The historian Walter Nigg described the execution of witches during the time period in his book *The Heretics*: "... she was stripped naked and the executioner shaved off all her body hair in order to seek in the hidden places of the body the sign which the devil imprinted on his cohorts. Warts, freckles,

and birthmarks were considered certain tokens of amorous relations with Satan" (Walter Nigg). Many people, especially women, became the target of witch hunt when found any evidence of practicing witchcraft. The fact that this tragedy happened also shows the low positions of the women during the time period. In short, thousands of people were victimized in the Elizabethan era as witch hunt swept throughout Britain and other parts of Europe.

One of the most prominent historical figures that contributed to the study of witchcraft and ignited the hunting of witches is King James I. His fascination with witchcraft and supernatural inspired his writing of *Daemonologie*, a book James I worked on for years accounting his findings and ideologies on witchcraft. He "believed that kings were chosen by God and granted their throne by divine right, James also believed that the Devil and his followers sought to destroy royal power by means of evil spells" (The Royal Play). King James' book *Daemonologie* book described in detail the evil doings of the witches, and focused especially on the method of defeating their spells. As a result, this book created a wave of witch-hunting in Britain when thousands of people are killed from practicing witchcraft. Upon witnessing King James passionate devotion to witch hunting, Shakespeare saw it as a chance to please the king. The glorification of Banquo and the emphasis on witchcraft clearly shows Shakespeare's appeal to King James. Just like what Jane Jack said, "The works of James are part of the 'background' of the tragedy of *Macbeth*" (Jane H. Jack). Shakespeare dedicated much content of the play on the mysterious and evil nature of the witches, much similar to King James' ideology. He wrote *Macbeth*, with a lot of its content magnifying King James and his findings on witchcraft. In a large extent, the distinctive perspective

on witchcraft offered in Macbeth serves to please the King James and appeal to his philosophies.

To sum up, a careful investigation on the witchcraft in William Shakespeare's famous play Macbeth reveals the history of witchcraft during the Elizabethan era. The descriptions found in the play could be dated back to the origin of black magic and the destruction brought by the fearing of it.