



## WITCHES AND WITCHCRAFT MACBETH

**Witches** and **witchcraft** were viewed very differently during the reign of James I to how they are now. In short: there was a common belief that witches existed and that they were harmful.

It's worth noting that almost all of these people were **women**, many of whom were old and vulnerable.

### Witches and Witchcraft

Unfortunate events and personal misfortune were often (wrongly) attributed to witchcraft and thousands of people were put on trial. Indeed, James I felt so strongly about the threat posed by witches – who he called the 'detestable slaves of the Devil' – that he wrote a book called *Daemonologie* about them. In terms of what this means for us, we need to be aware that **many of the ideas and beliefs of James I are reflected in the 'witchcraft' scenes from the play.**

### Questions to Consider

- How does Shakespeare make the witches appear strange and threatening in **A1-S1**?
- How are the witches presented as malign and harmful at the start of **A1-S3**?
- Why is it important that the witches look 'not like the inhabitants o' the earth' in **A1-S3**?
- How do the reactions of Macbeth and Banquo differ when they hear the prophecies in **A1-S3**?
- How does Shakespeare (once again) make the witches appear strange and threatening in **A4-S1**?

### Key Points

- The witches seem to have a greater **influence** over Macbeth than Banquo
- Macbeth is strongly influenced by the connection between the witches' **prophecies** and Duncan's decision to reward him
- The witches are presented as powerful, **mysterious** figures who occupy a place beyond society and the natural world
- The 'otherness' of the witches is signified through their **grotesque** appearance and distinctive patterns of speech
- There is a **connection** to be made between the witches and Lady Macbeth's appeal to 'darkness' and evil spirits