THE WITCHES
2020

'Fair is Foul and Foul is Fair'

notes taken from *various sources*

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DEFINITION

antithesis, which is a term used for sentences or structures built around contrasting concepts

- Shakespeare often uses it to highlight conflicting ideas and concepts

HOW THE WITCHES ARE DESCRIBED

- Wyrd
    - The word 'weird' seems to have come into modern English entirely from its use in Macbeth
        - It appears 6 times in the play
            - 5 times as the 'weird sisters'
                - 1.3.32
                - 1.5.8
                - 2.1.20
                - 3.4.133
                - 4.1.136
            - Once as the 'weird women'
                - 3.1.2
    - In Anglo-Saxon literature, 'Wyrd' is the name of the personified goddess of 'fate'
        - Shakespeare's use and repetition of the word 'weird' may be an allusion to Anglo-Saxon literature and the idea of Macbeth's fate
            - It makes us question whether or not the witches can actually see the future
            - Perhaps they have the power to control Macbeth's fate
            - In act 1, scene 2, the sergeant describes Macbeth as 'disdaining fortune' and 'like valor's minion carved out his passage'
                - 'fortune' is ambiguous because it can mean luck, wealth or fate
                    - There is a suggestion that he does not need luck or wealth and does not need or believe in fate
                        - He is someone who carves out his own fate
                            - So does he kill Duncan because the Witches tricked him or pushed him to do it?
                            - Or does he kill Duncan because he was planning to do it all along?
    - It is also a common noun meaning each man has his own wyrd or destiny
        - Became 'weird' in modern English
- 'So withered and wild in their attire': Banquo (1.3.40)
- 'the weird women': Banquo (3.1.1.)
- 'secret, black, and midnight hags': Macbeth (4.1.1)

THE WITCHES AS FIGURES OF FATE

Their role in Macbeth's downfall is highly ambiguous

- They are potentially figures of fate
    - They may be related to 'The Three Fates', pagan figures
        - The Three Fates were three sister goddesses that appeared in Greek and Roman mythology – Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos
            - The ancient Greeks believed that they controlled many aspects of a person's life, such as when life began, ended and everything in between
                - But a man could still change his destiny
                    - These goddesses could simply intervene with decisions that could be helpful or harmful
                        - Often described as elderly, stern, severe, cold and unmerciful just like Banquo's 'So withered and wild in their attire'
                            - James claimed to have been greeted by 'three fatal sisters' or 'three sybils' during his visit to Oxford in 1605 who hailed him as the ruler of a united Britain and recalled the historical Banquo as his ancestor
                            - Three ambivalent female figures also appear in Shakespeare's source, The Holinshed Chronicles
    - If Macbeth's downfall is mapped out, then where do we place the blame for his actions?
        - If the witches have sealed his fate, then we can no longer use Aristotle's definition of tragedy, which dictates that tragedy is the cause of human error
            - Hamartia
                - The story changes from tragedy to one almost purely about the power of the supernatural
- Retribution
    - I'll drain him dry as hay.
      Sleep shall neither night nor day
      hang upon his penthouse lid.
      He shall live a man forbid.
      Weary sev'nnights, nine times nine,
      Shall he dwindle, peak, and pine. (1.3.19 - 25)
        - This scene appears to have two main purposes
            - On the surface, it appears to present the witches as symbols of retribution
                - The idea of retribution here may be designed to invoke imagery and fear associated with the Greek mythological goddess Nemesis
                    - she was seen as a monstrous figure of revenge and anger, invoked particularly against those whose hubris and arrogance got the better of them
                        - the point here may be to heighten the suspense, mystery and fear induced by the Witches' introduction in the opening scene of the play
            - from another perspective, this scene appears to present the Witches under a paradoxical light and perhaps raises questions as to the nature of the power they hold
                - the fact that the first witch seeks retribution with a 'sailor's wife' over 'chestnuts' is comical and presents the witches as petty; and forces the audience to question why

surely such powerful supernatural beings would engage in petty behavior of this sort?

- They may be seen as a theatricalisation of the idea of temptation
- Figures that force the audience to question agency within the play and in humanity in general
    - Does Macbeth kill the king because the Witches make him do it?
    - Do the witches control Macbeth and the weather?
    - What are their powers, if any?
    - Can they see the future?
- They may represent the fears and superstitions of Elizabethan society
- They may be a parody of Elizabethan fears and superstitions, or, perhaps, James's obsession with witches
    - Banquo says to the witches: '… You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret' (1.3.45 - 46)
        - This quote is highly ambiguous because there are many ways in which we can interpret its meaning
            - one view is that Shakespeare is making use of metatheatre in order to present to the audience, the question of whether or not witches exist in real life, by pointing out that they are simply an illusion within the play
- They may be created to please James I who was known to have a deep belief in witches
    - James also claimed to have been met by 'three sybils' in Oxford in 1605 who hailed him as the ruler of a united Britain and recalled the historical Banquo as his ancestor
- Witches are associated with sickness and disorder
    - 'Hurley burley'
- They Speak in trochaic tetrameter and rhymed couplets
    - Reflects their unnatural state and disorder
- Macbeth uses the witches as instruments of evil
    - 'secret, black and midnight hags' (4.1.47)

THE DEFINITON AND EFFECT OF AMBIGUITY

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ambiguity exists where more than one interpretation is possible

- A well-written narrative often leaves us reflecting, contemplating and discussing its ideas long after we have put the book down or seen the play.
    - Ambiguity is seen as a highly effective quality in cultivating the reader's interests.
        - When used well, it can convey an intellectual pleasure of gratified curiosity; a unique kind of pleasure and satisfaction that we acquire via the exploration of curiosities and ideas (both those in our own minds as well as in the author's).
            - Ambiguity is particularly effective in piquing the reader's moral and emotional interests concerning the literal, philosophical, psychological, intellectual and metaphorical contents of stories and how these elements interact with each other in the fictional and real worlds.
                - For example, we may ask the following questions about the witches:
                    - Are they real?
                    - Do they have supernatural powers?
                    - Can they control the minds of men, like Macbeth?
                    - Can they control the weather?
                    - Do they cause Macbeth to kill Duncan?
                    - Is Lady Macbeth the fourth witch?

- Are all witches women?
- Can men be witches too?
- Are they simply victims of an extremely patriarchal society?

AMBIGUITY AND GRATIFIED CURIOSITY

The concept of gratified curiosity may appear paradoxical given that we often assume that satisfaction is derived by solving the story's mystery;

- however, we must also accept that not all mysteries are designed to be solved;
    - much of the pleasure of reading and watching drama comes from simply being given the room as well as the tools to delve into the mysteries of:
        - the human mind
        - conscience
        - emotions
        - and behaviours.
            - For example, the answer to the question as to whether or not the Witches can control Macbeth is probably not as important as the psychological satisfaction we get from being given multiple avenues with which to evaluate Macbeth, Lady Macbeth and Banquo's psyches
                - ambiguity compels us delve deeper into the minds and actions of not only the characters, but also the author's ideas while allowing us to overlay personal meaning on top of them;
                    - while we contemplate the causes of the events we witness on stage, Shakespeare's use of antithesis comes to the fore
                        - we begin to re-evaluate Macbeth's greatness at the beginning and his downfall at the end
                            - we also feel sympathy for him at being a victim of multiple forces pulling at him all at once
                                - the Witches' equivocal language
                                - his wife's manipulative ways
                                - society's pressure on men to define their masculinity via brutality
                                - the natural instinct to be ambitious
                        - we also wonder why Banquo has 'cursed thoughts' and 'cannot sleep'
                            - does 'cursed' imply that the Witches have put a spell on him?
                            - Is he guilty of ambitions similar to Macbeth and is that why he 'cannot sleep'?
                            - Why does he half echo the Witches lines with 'why do you fear that which seems to be so fair?'
                        - ambiguity is an important tool for stimulating our cognitive understanding and interpretive abilities.

AMBIGUITY AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

Ambiguity also reflects the reality of the human condition precisely because life itself is so ambiguous – some questions in life, such as:

- the origins of our species
- or nature of agency (as Shakespeare questions in Macbeth) may never truly be answered and yet the pursuit of knowledge about these subjects drives us to find out more.

Additionally by refusing to allow easy categorization and interpretation, authors can generate huge interest and debate about their works;

- sometimes, if we really value the literature, we may even revisit it, either psychologically or literally.
    - Just as this play has been revisited by students all over the world for over 300 years

In conclusion, ambiguity can be effective in conveying humour and be used to disguise a character's true intentions, or to mislead the reader for the purpose of mystery;

- In act 1, scene 3, line 51 – 53 the witches say:
    - FIRST WITCH
      All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!
      SECOND WITCH
      All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of CAWDOR!
      FIRST WITCH
      All hail, Macbeth! That shalt be king hereafter!
        - The words 'all hail' appear to be an allusion to the Biblical story of Judas's betrayal of Jesus
            - Because we have already been introduced to the Witches' paltering method of speaking, we are just as confused as Macbeth as to what the final line here means
                - It is not yet clear as to how and why Macbeth will be king but we soon find out that Macbeth harbours conflicting ambitions of kingship
                    - This may be his hubris which causes him to commit his hamartia
        - 'Hail' is also reported in Macbeth's letter to his wife (1.5.7) and echoed in her first address to him (1.5.55)
        - Ross greets Macbeth with 'hail worthy thane' (1.3.11)
        - Ominously, 'hail' is repeated when Malcolm accepts the throne in 5.8.65, 70 – 71
            - MACDUFF
              Hail, King! For so thou art. Behold where stands
              Th'usurper's cursed head…
              Hail, King of Scotland!
              ALL
              Hail, King of Scotland!
                - The echoing of the Witches' words and the presence of 'Th'usurper's cursed head' appears foreboding and appears to indicate a cyclical structure to the play
                    - There is a suggestion that there will be a new usurper in the future, perhaps Macduff

it can drive readers, listeners, or observers toward a deeper, more personal meaning than might be conveyed by the inclusion of more explanatory words and phrases.

- Ambiguity is also an effective tool for forcing the reader to ponder the true meaning of a story or an element of the story such as character

HOW MIGHT AUDIENCES REACT TO THE WITCHES?

Elizabethan society was completely different to the one we live in today

- Some critics say that if we are only able to understand Macbeth by undertaking a huge amount of research into Elizabethan beliefs and laws about witches, then the play becomes a historical document, rather than a work of art
    - Ben Jonson, born 9 years after Shakespeare, was seen as the greatest successor to Shakespeare said that 'Shakespeare was not of age but for all time'
        - This means that Shakespeare's plays were so multidimensional that no matter what era they are read in, the people reading it from those times would find something to relate to

For modern productions, the Witches are slightly problematic in that it is difficult for modern theatre-goers to take them seriously or to suspend disbelief in order to engage with the play fully

- They may often be seen as simply pantomime figures, rather childish
    - However, we must remember that James I, who believed deeply in the existence of witches, wrote Daemonologie in 1597
        - Therefore, witches would have been a much more powerful imaginative symbol during the Elizabethan era then than they are now
            - This sometimes forces modern directors to find more modern equivalents because they cease to be scary for modern viewers

HOW THE SETTING COMPLEMENTS THE WITCHES

- The play opens in media res
    - It is at the end of a conversation the witches were having which throws the audience immediately into a sense of mystery
        - We are forced to question what were they talking about before we see them
- The play also begins with 'thunder and lightning'
    - The use of pathetic fallacy immediately alters the audience's mood to one of uncertainty, gloom and even fear
        - This helps to reflect the turbulent political and topical times the play was written in
            - James VI of Scotland had succeeded Elizabeth I three years before the play was written in 1606
                - James' ascension to the throne followed the death of one of the most popular rulers England has ever had, Elizabeth I
                    - There were factions within England that wanted to get rid of him
                        - This may partly have been because his mother, Mary Queen of Scots was executed by Elizabeth I as a traitor
                            - This naturally made James I a suspicious figure
                                - Additionally, Mary Queen of Scots was a Catholic and Elizabeth I was a Protestant
            - In November 1605, the Gunpowder Plot was uncovered
                - It was a Catholic plot to blow up the king in his parliament
                    - It was discovered in a Westminster cellar

        - It may have been a reaction by militant and disaffected Catholics who became distraught at the increased persecution during the second year of King James' reign
    - English citizens were ambivalent towards Europe-wide concerns about witches
        - But there was still widespread belief about the evil powers of the supernatural
        - And James was keen to reignite ferver for witch-hunting in England
- It almost all takes place in the dark, adding to the sense of mystery, thrill and evil atmosphere of the play

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LANGUAGE: THE WITCHES' SPEECH

For the most part the witches speak a particular rhythmical language which is distinguished from the rest of the play

- The first lines of the play establish this eerie soundscape:
    - When shall we three meet again?
      in thunder, lightning or in rain?
      When the hurleyburley's done,
      When the battle's lost and won (1.1.1 - 4)
        - The lines are short
            - 7 or 8 syllables, rather than the ten (pentameter) usual of Shakespeare's blank verse
            - Their shortness is further emphasized by heavy end-rhyme which draws attention to the final words
                - It already sounds incantatory

LANGUAGE: CONVENTIONAL DEPICTIONS OF WITCHES IN JACOBEAN DRAMA

Diane Purkiss points out that the rhythms Shakespeare uses to present the witches had become conventional in depicting witches in Jacobean drama

- They worked as a kind of icon for witches
- And audiences may have been far more attuned to these aural indicators as more modern audiences might be to visual iconography
    - For example, the murderer's black leather gloves or the superhero's cape or mask
    - Modern audiences are far more ocular-centric than Jacobean audiences
        - The octosyllabic couplet became a simplistic convention which divides evil from good

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LANGUAGE: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE WITCHES

- The trochaic tetrameter rhythm with rhyming couplets is a characteristic feature of the Witches
- So is their trademark clap of thunder that marks all four of their entrances
    - Act 1, scene 1
        - 'thunder and lightning. Enter three WITCHES'

- Act 1, scene 3
  - 'Thunder. Enter the three WITCHES'
- Act 3, scene 5
  - 'Thunder. Enter the three WITCHES meeting HECATE'
- Act 4, scene 1
  - 'A cavern. In the middle, a boiling cauldron. Thunder. Enter the three WITCHES'
- Act 4, scene 1
  - 'Thunder. FIRST APPARITION: an armed head'
- Act 4, scene 1
  - 'Thunder. SECOND APPARITION: a bloody child'
- Act 4, scene 1
  - 'Thunder. THIRD APPARITION: a child crowned, with a tree in his head'
    - Modern audiences tend to visualize the witches much more than Jacobean ones because our culture is much more ocular-centric
      - But the play was written during a time where technology for creating special effects was very limited and so dramatists, like Shakespeare, had to use both creative and conventional sounds, as a means to appeal to a society much more used to listening
        - Hence why he presents the Witches within a distinctive acoustic of evil, paradox and uncertainty

LANGUAGE: SYNTACTICAL INVERSION

When we meet the Witches in Act 4, their ritualistic chanting around the cauldron suggests a spell in the process of formation:

FIRST WITCH

Round about the cauldron go;
In the poisoned entrails throw.
Toad, that under cold stone
Days and nights has thirty-one
Sweltered venom sleeping got,
Boil thou first i' th' charmèd pot.

- Syntactic inversion emphasise the regular rhythm and rhyme scheme and distances this form of speech from anything approaching naturalistic dialogue
  - It appears to be another way of dividing evil from good and supernatural from natural

THE PURPOSE OF THE WITCHES' INTRODUCTION

The entrance in thunder and lightning

- Evokes disturbances in nature, confusion and turmoil, evil ritual, and riddling

Their plan 'meet with Macbeth' (1.1.7) is ominous and the general atmosphere of their introduction is inauspicious

- Their first two lines are questions

- When shall we three meet again?
  in thunder, lightning or in rain? (1.1.1 - 2)
    - This has the effect setting up an interrogative mood and the sense of mystery created is unsettling for the audience
        - It raises a number of questions about the future because it is referring to a future meeting
        - It raises a number of questions about the past because it begins in media res and therefore the audience has to catch up with the witches and try to work out what they were doing before
        - It raises the possibilities that perhaps they can control Macbeth and the weather just as Elizabethans who had invested beliefs in the existence of witches believed that they had the power to control the minds of men as well as the weather
            - However, some directors such as Tyrone Guthrie, who directed the play in 1934 actually cut this scene altogether because he believed that it gave the witches undue influence
                - This scene appears to depict the witches as being a governing force within the play and this complicates the definition of the play as a tragedy
                    - A tragedy, according to Aristotle's Poetics is about the failings of great people and the essence of the tragedy in Macbeth is that the two protagonists, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are ruined by the very qualities that make them great
                        - Their shared ambitions
                        - Their love for one another
                        - Their strength of mind
                        - Their determination to carve out their own futures, rather than rely on fortune
                            - In other words, depending on how this scene is interpreted, it can completely overpower the human scale of the Macbeths and the play therefore becomes one where supernatural influence is at the heart, rather than human error.
                            - Even though the idea of the witches' power allows for the Macbeths to abdicate some responsibility for their actions, the essence of tragedy is that it captures human actions and agency rather than supernatural direction

The witches also introduce us to a world of antithetical values

- 'Fair is foul and foul is fair;' (1.1.12)
    - This is a world that is founded on antithesis
        - Macbeth is honourable but he murders
        - Macbeth appears to be a tyrant but we sympathise with him because he is a victim of temptation, equivocal language and extreme gender definition perceptions
        - Banquo is an honourable soldier, but he has 'cursed thoughts' and 'cannot sleep'
        - Duncan is a gracious king but he can be seen as a coward and weak
        - Lady Macbeth is manipulative and aligns herself with evil spirits but we sympathise with her sad death because she was a dutiful wife
        - The Witches appear designed to be frightening but seek retribution over 'chestnuts' and perhaps have no power at all
        - Even the construction of the scenes is antithetical

- Act 3, scene 3 features the murder of Banquo and the escape of his son Fleance which appears to keep the Witches' prophecy of 'thou shalt get kings, though thou be none' (1.3.70) alive
- In the very next scene, Macbeth's first line is 'You know your degrees; sit down…'
    - Dramatic irony is created through antithesis of the previous murder scene and the seemingly relaxed atmosphere in the subsequent 'Banquet' scene, particularly with Macbeth the one giving instructions on both accounts; in the previous scene, Banquo is murdered under his instructions and here, he instructs the other thanes to 'sit down', possibly symbolic of his need to pacify the other thanes in order for his plan to be successful; there is also antithesis between appearance and reality
        - Macbeth and his wife appear to be hospitable yet they are colluding in regicide; a matter of not only of high treason, nut also sacrilegious evil
            - The sequence of events heightens tension here because we know the evil deeds Macbeth has committed behind the thanes' backs and we begin to anticipate that it is only a matter of time before the Macbeths are exposed but it is unclear as to how the drama will unfold

THE WITCHES & METATHEATRE: DEFINITION OF METATHEATRE

Metatheatre is a term coined by Lionel Abel, but there are various disagreements about its exact definition; it could mean the following:

- reflecting comedy and tragedy at the same time, where the audience can laugh at the protagonist while feeling empathetic simultaneously.

In fact, the etymology of the word "metatheatre" comes from the Greek "meta" which means "a level beyond."

- Going back this far, then, the term becomes a device where a play or a novel or a work comments upon itself.

Then Richard Hornby came along, changing the idea yet again.
Richard Hornby gave five distinct techniques that may be found in metatheatre.

- These include, ceremony within a play, role-playing within a role, reference to reality, self-reference of the drama, and play within a play.

Then Stuart Davis arrived and furthered the defintion by including the new noun of "metatheatricality" to mean having a fundamental effect of destabilizing realism.

- It is perhaps the most modern and current idea involving Metatheatre:
    - "Metatheatre" is a convenient name for the quality or force in a play which challenges theatre's claim to be simply realistic -- to be nothing but a mirror in which we view the actions and sufferings of characters like ourselves, suspending our disbelief in their reality.

Perhaps the most simple definition to work with is that metatheatre or metadrama is theatre about theatre or drama about drama.

- a play within a play

EFFECTS OF METATHEATRE

- Metatheatre begins by sharpening our awareness of the *unlikeness* of life to dramatic art; but paradoxically, it may also end by making us aware of life's uncanny likeness to art or illusion.
- By calling attention to the strangeness, artificiality, illusoriness, or arbitrariness -- in short, the theatricality -- of the life we live, it marks those frames and boundaries that conventional dramatic realism would hide.
- It may present action so alien, improbable, stylized, or absurd that we are forced to acknowledge the estranging frame that encloses a whole play.
- It may, on the other hand, break the frame of the "fourth wall" of conventional theatre, reaching out to assault the audience or to draw it into the realm of the play. It may -- by devices like plays within plays, self-consciously "theatrical" characters, and commentary on the theatre itself -- dwell on the boundaries between "illusion" or artifice and "reality" *within* a play, making us speculate on the complex mixture of illusion and reality in our ordinary experience. Any theatrical device can work metatheatrically if we sense in it a certain deliberate reflexiveness, a tendency to refer to itself or to its context in a more general mode: to theatre itself; to art, artifice, and illusion; and perhaps above all to language as such.

METATHEATRE IN *MACBETH*

Banquo says to the witches: '… You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret' (1.3.45 - 46)

- This quote is highly ambiguous because there are many ways in which we can interpret its meaning
    - one view is that Shakespeare is making use of metatheatre

METATHEATRE AND THE WITCHES

During the Jacobean era, women were not permitted to perform on stage and so female characters were cast by men instead

- Usually they were played by adolescent men whose voices had not broken yet
    - However, Banquo's 'And yet your beards…' may suggest that fairly masculine, and facially-hairy men played the Weird Sisters.
        - His words may simply be a reminder to the audience that the people playing the 'Weird Sisters' were men and therefore a source of comic relief
        - However, thinking about it from the point of view of metatheatre, it could be a reminder to the audience that they are watching a piece of dramatic art; the point being that perhaps not everything in it is meant to mirror real life
            - The idea that not everything in art mirrors life is also reflected in Shakespeare's treatment of his source material, *The Holinshed Chronicles*
                - For example, James claimed to be descended from the historical Banquo and so Shakespeare exonerates from blame the character inherited from the chronicle sources, which state that Banquo was privy to the murder of Duncan.
                    - However, there are clues that Banquo is not so whitewashed as we might have thought at first

- For example, he has 'cursed thoughts', and says he 'cannot sleep' – the ultimate signal of a guilty conscience.

- So why does Shakespeare cast the witches under the light of metatheatre?
  - One way to see it is that it 'breaks the fourth wall' and so it draws the audience into the realm of the play and perhaps reflects the play's own equivocal dealings with illusion and reality, reflected in the witches' paradoxical line 'fair is foul and foul is fair'
    - Once again Shakespeare precipitates the conflict and central concerns of the play within the realm of antithesis
    - From this perspective, it may be a way of forcing the audience to ponder what is real and what is illusion, both within the play and in real-life and therefore makes us consider the difference between real-life and theatre and whether there is, in fact, any difference at all.
      - If we take this view even further, it could be suggested that Shakespeare is in fact subtly undermining James's belief in witches
        - By reminding us that they are simply an illusion within the play, he could be pushing the audience to question whether or not they were an illusion, not only within the play, but outside of it as well: in real-life

WHY WAS JAMES SO PREOCCUPIED WITH WITCHCRAFT?

The year 1590 witnessed the largest and most high-profile witch trials in Scottish history

- No fewer than 70 suspects were rounded up in North Berwick, on suspicion of raising a storm to destroy Anne's ship on her first attempt to come to Scotland and again when King James's fleet conveyed his new bride, Anne of Denmark, across the North Sea.
- Convinced the tempests that had almost cost their lives had been summoned by witchcraft, James was intent upon bringing the perpetrators to justice.
- Most of the suspects soon confessed – under torture – to concocting a host of bizarre and gruesome spells and rituals in order to whip up the storm.
  - These included binding the severed body parts of a dead man to the legs of a cat, then tossing the bundle into the waves, whereupon "there did arise such a tempest in the sea, as a greater hath not been seen".
  - James was so appalled when he heard such tales that he decided to personally superintend the interrogations.
    - He had one of the main suspects, Agnes Sampson, brought to Holyroodhouse in Edinburgh so that he could question her himself.
      - When she "stood stiffly in denial" of the charges against her, she "had all her hair shaved off … and her head thrawn [wrenched] with a rope according to the custom of that country, being a pain most grievous".
        - All of this continued for an hour, while the king looked on with "great delight".
          - Eventually, he was so convinced by her recount of a private conversation he had had with his wife that:
            - "The king's majesty wondered greatly, and swore by the living God, that he believed all the devils in hell could not have discovered the

same, acknowledging her words to be most true, and therefore gave the more credit to the rest that is before declared."

- From that moment, his interest in witchcraft deepened into a dangerous obsession.
- He also claimed that the death (by execution) of his mother, Mary, Queen of Scots in 1567, was 'visible in Scotlande before it did really happen'
  - He then set about intensifying popular fear of witches with the *Newes from Scotland pamphlet* and *Daemonology*, a painstaking and meticulous piece of work that must have taken James years to complete

WHY DID JAMES WRITE *DAEMONOLOGIE*?

In James's publication, *Daemonologie*, 1597, his 'Preface To The Reader' lays out his purpose for the book:

- 'The fearefull aboundinge at this time in this countrie, of these detestable slaues of the Deuill, the Witches or enchaunters, hath moved me (beloued reader) to dispatch in post, this following treatise of mine, not in any wise (as I protest) to serue for a shew of my learning & ingine, but onely (mooued of conscience) to preasse thereby, so farre as I can, to resolue the doubting harts of many; both that such assaultes of Sathan are most certainly practized, & that the instrumentes thereof, merits most severly to be punished: against the damnable opinions of two principally in our age, wherof the one called SCOT an Englishman, is not ashamed in publike print to deny, that ther can be such a thing as Witch-craft: and so mainteines the old error of the Sadducees, [xii] in denying of spirits.'
  - The witch-hunts that swept across Europe from 1450 to 1750 were among the most controversial and terrifying phenomena in history
  - They resulted in the trial of around 100,000 people (most of them women), a little under half of whom were put to death
  - One of the most active centres of witch-hunting was Scotland
    - perhaps 4,000 people were consigned to the flames
      - a striking number for such a small country
      - and more than double the execution rate in England
        - The ferocity of these persecutions can be attributed to the most notorious royal witch-hunter: King James VI of Scotland
          - However, when Elizabeth I of England died in 1603 without any direct heirs, the Scottish King was named her successor
            - He found his new subjects to be a good deal more ambivalent than their northern neighbours (and, indeed, the rest of Europe) on the subject of witchcraft.
              - Executions had declined in England and there was growing skepticism about the existence of witches
                - He then set about determined to convince the public that witchcraft was real and to drown out the few dissenting voices such as Reginald Scot, who tried to disprove the existence of witches with his book, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* in 1584

- The purpose of *Daemonologie* wasn't only to convince the doubters of the existence of witchcraft
    - it was also to inspire those who persecuted witches to do so with new vigour and determination.
        - James described witchcraft as "high treason against God", which meant that all manner of horrors were justified in wringing confessions from the accused.
            - Though lacking in original or profound ideas, the fact that it had been written by a king made it enormously influential.
                - It is no coincidence that cases of witchcraft in his kingdom multiplied at an alarming rate thereafter.
- James's subjects were not unusually credulous, however. In persuading them of the evils of witchcraft he was, to a large extent, pushing on an open door.
    - Such beliefs had been an integral part of society for hundreds, if not thousands, of years.
        - Until the Enlightenment of the 18th century, and even beyond, the Kingdom of Darkness seemed as real as the Kingdom of Heaven, and ordinary people everywhere believed in devils, imps, fairies, goblins and ghosts, as well as other legendary creatures such as vampires, werewolves and unicorns.
            - Everyone feared evil portents – a hare crossing one's path, for example, or a picture falling from the wall. A pregnant woman would avoid gazing at the moon for fear that it could render her baby insane.
                - In one of his tracts on witchcraft, Puritan preacher George Gifford described a number of signs that were believed to augur evil – from salt spilt at a banquet to the sudden onset of a nosebleed.

JAMES'S BELIEFS ABOUT WOMEN

James's beliefs had a dangerously misogynistic core.

- He grew up to scorn – even revile – women.
    - Though he was by no means alone in his view of the natural weakness and inferiority of women, his aversion towards them was unusually intense.
        - He took every opportunity to propound the view that they were far more likely than men to succumb to witchcraft.
            - "As that sex is frailer than man is, so is it easier to be entrapped in these gross snares of the Devil," he argued in Daemonologie, "as was overwell proved to be true by the Serpent's deceiving of Eve at the beginning which makes him the friendlier with that sex since then."
                - He would later commission a new version of the Bible in which all references to witches were rewritten in the female gender.
                    - Notice the similarities with Shakespeare's portrayal of Lady Macbeth who appears to manipulate Macbeth into killing Duncan and who calls on the 'spirits' to 'unsex me here' and with her instruction to her husband to 'act like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under't'
                        - Shakespeare clearly aligns her with the devil and this appears to be an allusion, not only to the Bible but to James's own beliefs that women were 'friendlier' with the devil more easily than men.

OTHER PLAYS INSPIRED BY WITCHES

James's new subjects were eager to carry favour with him by echoing his hatred of witches.

- In the same year that the new Witchcraft Act was passed, Christopher Marlowe's dark morality play, *The Tragicall History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*, was published.
    - This had first been performed in around 1588, five years before the playwright's death, and was one of the most shocking portrayals of witchcraft ever to be performed.
        - Audiences were so aghast at the horrors that unfolded before them on stage that some claimed to have been driven mad by it, and on occasion real devils were said to have appeared on stage, "to the great amazement of both the actors and spectators".
            - As well as terrifying people into avoiding any dabbling with necromancy, the play also intensified their hatred and fear of witches.
                - It can have been no coincidence that it was published in the very year that James I began his crusade against witchcraft in England.

Other playwrights were quick to follow suit.

- Ben Jonson devised a number of masques for the entertainment of the king and his court.
    - The 'antimasque' to his *Masque of Queens* included the presentation of a group of witches who represented "the opposites to good fame".
        - The playwright had clearly done a great deal of research, for he referenced a range of current and classical demonological works as his sources.
            - He set out detailed instructions for the staging of the antimasque, describing the entering on stage of 11 witches "some with rats on their head; some on their shoulders; others with ointment pots at their girdles; all… making a confused noise, with strange gestures".
                - One of their number was "naked armed, bare-footed, her frock tucked, her hair knotted, and folded with vipers; in her hand a torch made of a dead man's arm, lighted; girded with a snake".

OTHER PLAYS INSPIRED BY WITCHES vs MACBETH

The most famous of all the literary works inspired by witchcraft, winning widespread acclaim in its day and ever since, was Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

- Deliberately short in length (James was known to have little patience for sitting through long plays), it is significant that the occasion of its inaugural performance was a visit by Queen Anne's brother, the king of Denmark, in 1606, given that it was James's voyage to his wife's native land that had prompted his obsession with witchcraft.
    - Shakespeare wove in several references to this voyage in the play,
        - such as when the First Witch claims that she set sail in a sieve, just as one of the North Berwick witches was accused of doing.
            - The line "Though his bark cannot be lost/Yet it shall be tempest-tossed" almost certainly alluded to James's near-death experience in 1589.
                - All the leaders of the English judiciary would have been present at this important state occasion, and this was exactly the sort of play that would inspire within them the same witch-hunting fervour as their royal master.

The drama centres around Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, who murder King Duncan to seize the throne of Scotland after three witches prophesied Macbeth's succession.

- Whether the witches thus caused the overthrow of the natural succession or merely brought out Macbeth's inherent evil is left to the audience's imagination.
    - Either way, the play both confirmed and introduced new elements to the stereotypical view of a witch, with her spells, familiars and inherent evil. It also spawned two of the most-quoted lines in English literary history:
        - *"Double, double, toil and trouble;*
          Fire burn, and cauldron bubble."
            - *Macbeth* instilled fear among those watching that witchcraft was not just a satanic confederacy, but a conspiracy against the state.
                - The latter notion was all too readily accepted in England at this time because the play was performed just a few months after one of the most notorious conspiracies in history: the gunpowder plot.
                    - Within the space of three short years, England had been catapulted from the 'golden age' of the Virgin Queen into one of the darkest and most dangerous periods of its history.

Tracy Borman is author of *Witches: James I and the English Witch Hunts* (Vintage, 2014). To find out more about Tracy, visitwww.tracyborman.co.uk.