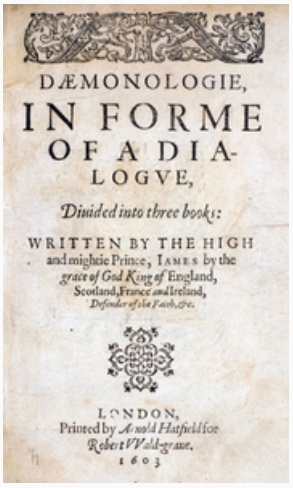
King James I and witchcraft

People in Shakespeare's time were very superstitious. They believed in witches, spirits and omens and thought that diseases, such as the plague, were caused by black magic.


DÆMONOLOGIE,
IN FORME
OF A DIA-
LOGVE,
Diuided into three bookes:
WRITTEN BY THE HIGH
and mighty Prince, IAMES by the
grace of God King of England,
Scotland, France and Ireland,
Defender of the Faith, &c.
LONDON,
Printed by Arnold Hatfield for
Robert Waldegrave.
1603

King James I was very interested in witchcraft, so much so he wrote a book about the subject, 'Daemonologie' in 1597. He was caught in a terrible storm whilst sailing on the North Sea and believed that witches had targeted him personally. He later made a law that stated witches should be hunted and punished as their harmful magic was a threat to Christianity.

Another very popular book published around this time, 'Discovery of Witchcraft' 1584, included this description by its author, Reginald Scott:

"The hurtful witches can raise hail, tempests and hurtful weather as lightning and thunder. These can pass from place to place in the air invisible...they can most easily appear in solitary places...they can foreshow things to come and see them as though they were present."

This is embodied by the first appearance of the witches in 'Macbeth'. Shakespeare used stories from other sources to inspire his plays. Another of these sources was 'The Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande' by Holinshed, published in1577.

In this book, many of the characters from Macbeth are mentioned; the witches, Macbeth, Fleance, King Duff (thought to be Duncan) and Banquo. James I believed he was descended from Banquo and so Shakespeare made him a hero when in real life he was not very nice.



In 'The Chronicles...' the three witches are depicted as young girls rather than the dark, withered characters that appear in the play. This youthful appearance reflected the fact that Tudors believed any female could be a witch.

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