

Male 'Supernatural Solicitation' on the Jacobean Stage

## Introduction

Christina Lerner argues that “in situations of tension in which men resort to violence, women use witchcraft,” and while this statement is generally based in truth, it fails to address a common trope within Jacobean drama, men being the customers of witchcraft. Thematically, witchcraft was incredibly popular on the Early Modern Stage. This is partially because King James I was highly suspicious and fascinated by witchcraft. Additionally, witchcraft had been a widespread anxiety in most of Europe since around the fourteenth century and was perpetuated by the Church.<sup>1</sup> Witchcraft is defined as “magic or other supernatural practices; (the use of) magical or supernatural powers, especially for evil purposes or as used by witches.”<sup>2</sup> Deeply rooted in misogyny, the accusation and persecution of witches mainly targeted women. Witches were generally characterized as “crones who meet secretly at night, indulge in cannibalism and orgiastic rites with the Devil, or Satan, and perform black magic.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, the representation of witches on the Jacobean stage is primarily female. I would argue that the act of “using” witchcraft does not strictly mean, for example, the act of conjuring, but rather employing magic generally, whether that be for information or for a material charm.

In response to Lerner’s argument, it is generally upheld that men tended to be more physically aggressive than women during this period:

Early cross-cultural psychological studies of female aggression concluded that women are less aggressive than men, a conclusion that fit comfortably with the prevailing Western notion of “natural” female character at the time.... Across cultures, males are more likely than females to use direct physical aggression... and females are more likely than males to use indirect aggression: spreading gossip, manipulating surrogates, and other forms of covert attack.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Russell, Jeffrey Burton, and Ioan M. Lewis. 2023. “Witchcraft.” In *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

<sup>2</sup> “Witchcraft, n.” OED Online. March 2023. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/229580>.

<sup>3</sup> Russell. “Witchcraft.” In *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

<sup>4</sup> Bever, E. 2002. “Witchcraft, Female Aggression, and Power in the Early Modern Community.” *Journal of Social History* 35 (4): 955–88. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsh.2002.0042>. 968.

Witchcraft certainly fits into the category of indirect aggression; this builds on the Early Modern understanding that the practice of witchcraft was primarily dominated by women. This, however, does not mean that men could not- or did not- practice witchcraft. Records show that “across Europe, in the years of witch persecution around 6,000 men- 10 to 15 of the total- were executed for witchcraft.”<sup>5</sup> The idea that a man could be accused of witchcraft undermines the traditional definition of what a witch is. Certainly, there were other types of magic-users (sorcerers, magicians, etc.), but because there were men accused of witchcraft specifically, it tells us that “witchcraft while sex-related, was not sex-specific.”<sup>6</sup> The idea that witchcraft as a practice and a construct could be more open-ended undermines the strict dichotomy that men tend to utilize physical aggression while women resort to witchcraft.

Throughout the canon of Jacobean drama there are many instances of men employing witches or other familiar-like entities to do their bidding. A clear and popular example of this is Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, where Macbeth seeks out the help of the witches to learn of his fate, he seeks information and prophecy rather than something physical to make a change. An excellent example of a man using familiars to do his bidding is Prospero in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. Finally, in Middleton’s *The Witch*, there are multiple men seeking supernatural help from witches to help literally affect the circumstances of their lives. While they are not generally the ones performing rituals and whatnot, they do “use witchcraft” to their own advantages.

## **Macbeth**

*Macbeth* is regarded as Shakespeare’s “witchiest” play, and for good reason; it opens with the weird sisters, they serve as a catalyst for the main action, and they play a critical role in

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<sup>5</sup> “Witchcraft: Eight Myths and Misconceptions.” n.d. English Heritage. <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/histories/eight-witchcraft-myths/>.

<sup>6</sup> Gaskill, Malcolm. 2013. “The Devil in the Shape of a Man: Witchcraft, Conflict and Belief in Jacobean England.” In *Gender and Witchcraft*, 145. Routledge.

Macbeth's inevitable downfall. Written around 1606, *Macbeth* is a quintessential Jacobean tragedy and remains highly popular to this day. Considering that it is such an infamous play and so widely produced, it is interesting that so little scholarship has been done regarding Macbeth's "use" of witchcraft. He never himself performs witchcraft, but multiple times throughout the play he relies on it for information and reassurance. The first time he meets the witches in act I scene iii, he immediately becomes intoxicated by the information they give him and begs them to tell him more:

Stay, you imperfect speakers, tell me more:  
By Sinel's death I know I am thane of Glamis;  
But how of Cawdor? the thane of Cawdor lives,  
A prosperous gentleman; and to be king  
Stands not within the prospect of belief, / 175  
No more than to be Cawdor. Say from whence  
You owe this strange intelligence? or why  
Upon this blasted heath you stop our way  
With such prophetic greeting? Speak, I charge you.  
-Macbeth I.iii, (70-78)<sup>7</sup>

By merely encouraging their dark magic and allowing it to affect him, he is in a way, using witchcraft. Macbeth goes on to contemplate the nature of witchcraft and is unable to confidently say if it is "good" or "ill:"

This supernatural soliciting  
Cannot be ill, cannot be good: if ill,  
Why hath it given me earnest of success,  
Commencing in a truth? I am thane of Cawdor:  
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion  
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair  
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,  
Against the use of nature?  
-Macbeth I.iii, (132-139)<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Shakespeare, William. "Macbeth."

<sup>8</sup> Shakespeare. "Macbeth."

Any good Protestant Jacobean would know that the proper response to the question of the morality of witchcraft would be that it is a tool of the devil's. By not immediately condemning the practice of witchcraft and all its "evil," Macbeth is- by proxy- practicing it, or at a minimum, enabling it. It is clear that the witches have gotten through to Macbeth and that he believes them wholeheartedly. He goes on to write a letter to his wife detailing what has happened and thus implicating her in the whole affair:

'They met me in the day of success: and I have  
learned by the perfectest report, they have more in  
them than mortal knowledge. When I burned in desire  
to question them further, they made themselves air,  
into which they vanished. Whiles I stood rapt in  
the wonder of it, came missives from the king, who  
all-hailed me 'Thane of Cawdor;' by which title,  
before, these weird sisters saluted me, and referred  
me to the coming on of time, with 'Hail, king that shalt be!'  
-Macbeth I.v, (1-8)<sup>9</sup>

It is difficult to look at this scene and not see an interesting parallel, or juxtaposition, to the book of Genesis in the Bible regarding "the fall." In that story, Eve is the one who fell victim to the devil's temptation and promises of "knowledge" first, and many of the stereotypes concerning women's susceptibility to falling victim to the devil stem from this story.<sup>10</sup> In *Macbeth*, however, a man is the one to fall victim to temptation first, and then relays the information to his wife. Yes, the convoy of the devil in *Macbeth* is three women, but here the husband is being tempted first. Shakespeare, either intentionally or unintentionally, has represented the idea that both sexes are equally susceptible to falling prey to the work of the devil, and therefore, witchcraft. Later in the play, desperate for more information concerning his fate, Macbeth goes back to the witches to learn more about their prophecy:

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<sup>9</sup> Shakespeare. "Macbeth."

<sup>10</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. 2023. "Fall of Man." In *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

I conjure you, by that which you profess,  
Howe'er you come to know it, answer me:  
Though you untie the winds and let them fight  
Against the churches; though the yesty waves  
Confound and swallow navigation up;  
Though bladed corn be lodged and trees blown down;  
Though castles topple on their warders' heads;  
Though palaces and pyramids do slope  
Their heads to their foundations; though the treasure  
Of nature's germens tumble all together,  
Even till destruction sicken; answer me  
To what I ask you.  
-Macbeth IV.i, (49-60)<sup>11</sup>

He is so desperate for their aid, that he blatantly disregards the destructive nature of their rituals. It is important to note that the witches are not truly altering anything, the power of their magic relies purely in Macbeth's mental state.<sup>12</sup> He becomes so intoxicated with pride and power that he has become reliant and desensitized to witchcraft:

Bring me no more reports; let them fly all:  
Till Birnam wood remove to Dunsinane,  
I cannot taint with fear. What's the boy Malcolm?  
Was he not born of woman? The spirits that know  
All mortal consequences have pronounced me thus:  
'Fear not, Macbeth; no man that's born of woman  
Shall e'er have power upon thee.' Then fly, false thanes,  
And mingle with the English epicures:  
The mind I sway by and the heart I bear  
Shall never sag with doubt nor shake with fear.  
-Macbeth V.iii, (1-10)<sup>13</sup>

So (falsely) secure in the knowledge that the witches have imparted upon him, his reliance on their prophecy blindly drives him to his downfall. His indirect use of witchcraft gave him a false sense of security which allowed for the witches' prophecy to be fulfilled. Similar to how Lady Macbeth cannot survive because she does not adhere to the patriarchal laws of gender,

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<sup>11</sup> Shakespeare. "Macbeth."

<sup>12</sup> Dorak, H. M. 1907. "'Supernatural Soliciting' in Shakespeare." *The Sewanee Review* 15 (3): 323.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/27530861.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Shakespeare. "Macbeth."

Macbeth cannot survive because he relied on the power of the devil. Macbeth, in a situation of tension, resorted to witchcraft to justify his physical violence.

## **The Tempest**

A few years later Shakespeare would write *The Tempest*, which uses magic in a much different manner. Prospero, the central protagonist of the play, is a magic user himself; however, he is not characterized as a witch. He better fits the criteria of a magician. The title magician refers to a strictly gendered form of magic, and scarcely refers to women. Magicians, and sorcerers alike, were known to use magic that sometimes could be used for good. Sorcery and magic exist on a spectrum when it comes to motivation, whereas witchcraft could only be evil. It was believed that witchcraft, and the ability to perform it were inherent, but sorcery could be learned.<sup>14</sup> Prospero's explanation as to how he is able to perform magic lines up with this understanding: "The liberal arts/Without a parallel; those being all my study.../Being transported/And rapt in secret studies" (*The Tempest* I.ii, 73-77).<sup>15</sup> Prospero as a magic user stands in stark contrast to the unseen and "foul witch Sycorax," who is characterized only by her cruelty:

This damned witch Sycorax,  
For mischiefs manifold and sorceries terrible  
To enter human hearing, from Algiers,  
Thou knowst, was banished. For one thing she did  
They would not take her life;  
-*The Tempest* I.ii, (263-267)<sup>16</sup>

Prospero goes on to explain how she imprisoned Ariel and left Caliban behind when she died, and how he freed Ariel and cared for Caliban. While she was cruel and unjust, Prospero

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<sup>14</sup> Melton, Gordon J. 2022. "Sorcery." In *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

<sup>15</sup> Shakespeare, William. "The Tempest."

<sup>16</sup> Shakespeare. "The Tempest."

characterizes himself as kind and generous. Earlier in the scene he says to Miranda: “I have done nothing but in care of thee” (The Tempest I.ii, 16), thus making his use of magic seem selfless. It is clear that Prospero is able to perform magic on his own, he states later: “My charms I’ll break, their senses I’ll restore,/And they shall be themselves” (The Tempest V.i, 31-32) before performing a ritual:

Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes, and groves;  
And ye that on the sands with printless foot  
Do chase the ebbing Neptune, and do fly him  
When he comes back; you demi-puppets that  
By moonshine do the green sour ringlets make,  
Whereof the ewe not bites; and you whose pastime  
Is to make midnight mushrooms, that rejoice  
To hear the solemn curfew; by whose aid-  
Weak masters though ye be- I have bedimm’d  
The noontide sun, call’d forth the mutinous wind.  
And ’twixt the green sea and the azured vault  
Set roaring war: to the dread rattling thunder  
Have I given fire, and rifted Jove’s stout oak  
With his own bolt; the strong-based promontory  
Have I made shake, and by the spurs pluck’d up  
The pine and cedar: graves at my command  
Have waked their sleepers, oped, and let ’em forth  
By my so potent art. But this rough magic  
I here abjure; and, when I have required  
Some heavenly music,-which even now I do,-  
To work mine end upon their senses, that  
This airy charm is for, I’ll break my staff,  
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,  
And deeper than did ever plummet sound  
I’ll drown my book.  
-The Tempest V.i, (33-57)<sup>17</sup>

Prospero’s mention of a book is significant because it once again draws attention to the fact that his magical arts are learned, not inherent. Prospero is a proficient magic-user, but throughout the play, he mostly relies on his familiar, Ariel, to perform magic for him. At the beginning of the play, he asks Ariel: “Hast thou, spirit,/Performed to point the tempest that I

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<sup>17</sup> Shakespeare. “The Tempest.”



bade thee?" (The Tempest I.ii, 193-194). According to western tradition, a familiar was a "small animal or imp kept as a witch's attendant, given to her by the devil or inherited from another witch."<sup>18</sup> All that is known about Ariel is that they failed to carry-out Sycorax's "abhorred commands" because they were "too delicate," and so Sycorax trapped them within a pine tree. Prospero later freed Ariel after Sycorax's death, thus inheriting Ariel as his familiar. Prospero uses Ariel to indirectly perform magic:

Bravely the figure of this harpy hast thou  
Perform'd, my Ariel; a grace it had, devouring:  
Of my instruction hast thou nothing bated  
In what thou hadst to say: so, with good life  
And observation strange, my meaner ministers  
Their several kinds have done.  
-The Tempest III.iii, (83-88)<sup>19</sup>

Although Prospero is able to perform magic for himself, by creating a level of separation between him and the literal act of magic being performed, he is elevating himself from being a common witch:

Prospero belongs to the higher order of magicians- those who commanded the services of superior intelligences- in distinction from those who, by a league made with Satan, submitted to be his instruments, paying for the enjoyment of the supernatural power thus gained the price of their souls' salvation.<sup>20</sup>

Prospero's use of magic came from a place of wanting to protect his daughter, but also from a sense of justice, or revenge. At the end of the play he comes to terms with the fact that his obsessive study of magic is what cost him his dukedom prior to the action of the play, and he gives up his magic to resort back to his purely human existence.<sup>21</sup> Evil or not, magic is unnatural

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<sup>18</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. 2016. "Familiar." In *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

<sup>19</sup> Shakespeare. "The Tempest."

<sup>20</sup> Rolfe, William J. 2018. "Magic, Books, and the Supernatural in Shakespeare's *Tempest*." In *Shakespeare's Comedy of the Tempest*. Trieste Publishing.

<sup>21</sup> Corfield, Cosmo. 1985. "Why Does Prospero Abjure His 'Rough Magic'?" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 36 (1): 31. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2870079>.

and goes against what is socially acceptable, so if he is to return to Milan at the end, it is reasonable that he must give up his powers in order to restore balance and go back to the “real world.” In reference back to Lerner’s argument, Prospero could have very easily enacted physical violence against his brother when he arrived on the island, but instead he indirectly used magic through Ariel to enact justice, rather than violent revenge.

### **The Witch- Middleton**

Written in 1613, Thomas Middleton’s *The Witch* makes for an interesting study into the idea of men as customers of witchcraft. The witches in this play have copious amounts of stage time and are even named; however, they are drenched in stereotypes concerning witches. Throughout the play three separate characters come to them for charms and whatnot. First is Sebastian. Sebastian is distraught and desperate to win Isabella back, so he turns to the supernatural, knowing that it is unfit for even himself to proceed: “Tis not fit/For any, hardly mine own secrecy,/ To know what I intend” (*The Witch* I.ii). He goes to the witches for a potion to make Antonio impotent on his wedding night to Isabella:

Heaven knows with what unwillingness and hate  
I enter this damn'd place. But such extremes  
Of wrongs in love fight 'gainst religious knowledge,  
That were I led by this disease to deaths  
As numberless as creatures that must die,  
I could not shun the way...  
Whate'er thou art, I have no spare time to fear thee;  
My horrors are so strong and great already  
That thou seem'st nothing. Up and laze not;  
Hadst thou my business, thou couldst ne'er sit so:  
'Twould firk thee into air a thousand mile  
Beyond thy ointments. I would I were read  
So much in thy black power [as] mine own griefs.  
I'm in great need of help: wilt give me any?  
-*The Witch* I.ii<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Middleton, Thomas. "The Witch."

The witches give Sebastian a charm to render Antonio impotent, and as he is leaving, Sebastian says:

I depart happy  
In what I have then, being constrained to this.  
[*Aside*] And grant, you greater powers that dispose men,  
That I may never need this hag again.  
-The Witch I.ii<sup>23</sup>

In saying this, he purges himself of the desire to meddle with the dark arts again. The charm works, and Sebastian gets his wish. In the grand scheme of the play, Sebastian's motives are quite noble. He was wronged by Antonio who intentionally spread rumors of his death so that he could marry Isabella, although he would go on to cheat on her. Sebastian has utilized witchcraft, but only indirectly, so he is rewarded with his happy ending at the end of the play.

The next customer of the witches' is Almachildes. Almachildes is described as "a fantastical gentleman." He goes to the witches with the lust-filled intention of obtaining a love potion to make Amoretta fall in love with him:

I will to the witches: they say they have charms and tricks to make a wench fall backwards, and lead a man herself to a country house some mile out of the town, like a fire-drake. There be such whoreson kind girls, and such bawdy witches, and I'll try conclusions.  
-The Witch I.i<sup>24</sup>

Almachildes' relationship with witchcraft is interesting, Hecate makes a comment after his arrival in announced that implies she knows him: "Tis Almachildes: fresh blood stirs in me,/The man that I have lusted to enjoy;/I have had him thrice in incubus already" (The Witch I.ii). She gives him the love charm and then he agrees to dine with them. He later stumbles on delirious over his time spent with the witches and discovers the love charm they made for him. Amoretta enters and he plants it on her bodice. It begins to work until it falls off her. The

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<sup>23</sup> Middleton. "The Witch."

<sup>24</sup> Middleton. "The Witch."

Duchess, also named Amoretta takes it, and the spell begins to fall over her too. The Duchess then begins to use Almachildes for her own plots against her husband the Duke.

Throughout the rest of the play, Almachildes' character goes through a whirlwind of accusations and plots, including the Duchess going to the witches for their help in killing him. The question as to why Almachildes has a much more tumultuous time with witchcraft than Sebastian does, must be raised. Perhaps it is because Almachildes' intentions in going to the witches were full of lust and were not honorable. Maybe it's because he doesn't regret his employment of the dark arts on a moral level, just on a level of disgust. Or perhaps it's because he has become involved with the main witch, Hecate, prior to the action of the play. Regardless, his motives for using witchcraft are far less honorable than Sebastian's.

The third and final character to seek the help of the witches is the Duchess. She goes to the witches for help in killing Almachildes. After some bickering, Hecate says that it will be done that night; however, we never see it come to fruition. The play ends with the reveal that Almachildes did not follow through on the Duchess' request to kill the Duke. Almachildes is a morally gray character, he didn't go through with the murder, but he isn't an upstanding citizen. The question of if he survives the night is incredibly interesting. It is truly up to audience interpretation as to whether the witches will follow through with their promise. Arguably, at the end of act V scene ii they are carrying out a ritual, but the results will always remain unknown.

## **Conclusion**

The ambiguous ending of *The Witch* stands in stark contrast to the conclusions of both *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*. Macbeth dies at the end of the play, fulfilling the witches' prophecy. In a sense, he is being punished for his use of witchcraft. Prospero in *The Tempest* does survive,

but at the expense of his powers. The definition of what it means to practice witchcraft is key when assessing Prospero's fate. Arguably, he is performing magic, not witchcraft, which were debatably considered to be two separate things. One thing that links all three plays together is the characterization of witches and witchcraft. The weird sisters, Sycorax, and Hecate and her coven are all misogynistically stereotypical hags. They are all exactly in-line with Jacobean beliefs surrounding witchcraft.

While physical violence might be what is typically expected of masculine characters during times of tension on the Jacobean stage, the use of witchcraft was not limited to women. The peak example of witchcraft on the Jacobean stage, *Macbeth*, shows a man actively seeking out supernatural support from witches. Macbeth hears from the weird sisters before he even picks up a sword to act, and he goes back to them again to directly ask them to perform a ritual for him. He indirectly uses witchcraft to fuel his actions. In the case of Prospero, while he can perform magic himself, he relies on Ariel to do the "dirty work" for him when it comes to his quest for justice. He both directly and indirectly uses magic for his own means. Finally, *The Witch* provides examples of two very different types of men seeking the help of witchcraft to achieve their goals, both in the pursuit of women. In the cases of all three plays, the men could have resorted to physical violence without consulting supernatural powers first. Therefore, the stereotype that men resort to violence while women resort to witchcraft is not a universally true statement.

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