



Witchcraft and Magic in *The Tempest*

During the Elizabethan and Jacobean era, magic, religion and science were seen as equally valid doctrines to explain how the world worked. Elizabethans believed in the power of magic and felt it was very real. Magic was accepted by the educated and elite: King James I wrote a book exploring the topic called *Daemonologie* in 1603, approximately eight years prior to the performance of *The Tempest*.



The purpose of *Daemonologie* was to prove the existence of magic and witchcraft and to assert what punishments should be put into place for those who practised these devilish crafts; for King James I, the only viable punishment was death.

Daemonologie puts the ratio of female to male witches at 20 to 1, and this figure went on to form the basis for the witch hunts that took place in the 16th and 17th centuries within Europe and the American colonies.

King James I explains why there's an abundance of *female witches* in the second book of his text:

'That sexe is frailer then man is, so is it easier to be intrapped in these grosse snares of the Deuill, as was ouer well proued to be true, by the Serpents deceiuing of Eua at the beginning, which makes him the homelier with that sexe sensine.'

1. In your own words, explain why King James I thinks there are more female witches than male? Do you agree with his belief?

2. Which supernatural being allows witches to have their magical powers? What would Christians have felt about witches?



3. In *Daemonologie*, King James writes that witches can "rayse stormes and tempestes in the aire, either vpon Sea or land". What skills does King James think witches have? Who has these skills in *The Tempest*?

4. Look at the descriptions below and decide which character they relate to: Sycorax, Prospero or both.

	Sycorax/ Propsero/ Both
Uses toads, beetles and bats to perform magic	
Exiled from Milan to the island	
Died on the island	
Can control the moon and tides	
Banished from Algiers to the island	
Use books to perform magic	
Raises a tempest	
Enslaves people with their magic	
Returns to their homeland of Milan	
Imprisons Ariel in a pine tree	
Charms Miranda to sleep	
Gives up their magic	
Releases those enslaved by magic and gives them their freedom	

5. a) How is the magic performed by Sycorax and Prospero similar and different?
b) Why do you think Sycorax is seen as a 'bad witch' and Prospero as a 'good magician'?
Think about their actions.



6. Prospero is described as a 'magician' whereas Sycorax is described as a 'witch'.
- Do these descriptions have the same connotations?
 - Which one is seen in a more positive light?
 - How might this fit with the themes/characterisations Shakespeare is exploring/developing?

7. Why do you think Prospero gives up his magic at the end?

Think about King James I's view of magic - who may have been in the audience watching the play.

Extension Activities:

- The Tempest* was Shakespeare's last play. How could Prospero's magic be compared to that of a playwright? How would that change your view of the ending (Prospero denouncing magic) and its message?
- Research the trial of the Pendle witches in 1612. Do you think they were committing witchcraft? What fate did they face?