

# BELIEF, LIFE, AND PERCEPTION: A STUDY ON WITCHCRAFT IN ELIZABETHAN AND JACOBEAN DRAMA

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The sixteenth-and-seventeenth-century England witnessed an outburst of interest in witchcraft in literature. This essay examines the three most crucial components of witchcraft: the familiars, the magic users, and the maleficium, respectively in some of the plays produced during the Elizabethan and Jacobean era and argues that the beliefs and gender perceptions demonstrated in the writings of witchcraft create gender discrimination and patriarchal anxieties.*

*This essay engages feminism studies and investigates the cultural and political aspects of the contemporary society. It is divided into three sections. The first section examines people's perceptions and attitudes toward the religious and popular beliefs revealed by the shaping of the familiars; the second section discusses the gender inequality displayed in the different attitudes imposed on male and female magic users; the final section develops the discussion into the revelation of patriarchal anxieties that existed in the society by investigating the typical maleficium.*

## **KEYWORDS**

*Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, belief, familiar, maleficium, witchcraft*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

According to Jason Hollis, during the Elizabethan and Jacobean era, “any sudden death or misfortune was just as likely to be attributed to an act of witchcraft rather than disease, infection, or bad luck, and the finger of suspicion would often point to an unpopular member of the community, or someone with whom the accuser had had a quarrel” [1]. Such superstition led to an explosion of witchcraft-related themes and elements in the contemporary drama. In most cases, these playwrights were inspired by the real-life events such as witch trials and made an effort to envision and portray the witches' mischiefs inflicted on their neighbours, which led them to the trials. Some of the most typical plays amongst them are *The Witch of Edmonton* by Thomas Dekker and *The Late Lancashire Witches* by Thomas Heywood and Richard Brome, since they can be traced to their corresponding trial records concerning the execution of Elizabeth Sawyer in 1621 and the condemnation of Alice Nutter and other nine people in 1612 [2]. There are also plenty of plays that do not focus on telling the story of a witch but contain various witchcraft elements and symbols to make the plots more intriguing and welcomed. The

name Hecate, which originates from the goddess of magic in classical mythology, is so popular among the English Renaissance playwrights that it has become a symbol for witches. The elements of Hecate, her coven, predictions, the witches' Sabbath, and the witch weather have helped a serious and not witchcraft-centric play like *Macbeth* gain popularity among the populace.

Since the exploitation of witchcraft marks a distinctive characteristic of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, such exploitation can be regarded as a lens through which researchers could observe and analyse the contemporary society. Previous interest in witchcraft concentrates mainly on four aspects: the implication of the rise of female power, shaping the popular belief, witchcraft in different literary genres, and the role of England in witch hunts.

In the aspect of the rise of female power, for instance, Stephanie Spoto believes that the emergence of the role "witch" marks the rise of female power, since the self-identification as a witch "helped impoverished women gain power and respect in their community" [3]. Furthermore, Alan Anderson and Raymond Gordon consider witch hunt as misogynist scapegoating or the patriarchal society's effort to contain the rise of women and acknowledge that the misogynist scapegoating was only effective because the stigmatization of women and seeing women as "the central target for a moral panic" had already existed before the witch hunt began [4].

Other scholars look into the contemporary cases in order to identify the possible causes that led to people's belief in the existence of witches and witchcraft. Keith Thomas, for example, refers to social anthropology to analyse the documented accusations of simple villagers in hope of revealing religion's role in shaping the popular belief of witchcraft [5]. Ronald Sawyer, having studied the casebooks of Richard Napier, an Anglican priest who recorded a number of witchcraft accusations brought by his clients, declares that the notes reveal the popular tendency to blame the diseases such as mental illnesses, fits, and lameness, which they did not understand at the time, on witchcraft, so that they could be given a direction to search for possible healing [6].

In addition to historical records, the literary genres concerning the Elizabethan and Jacobean witchcraft are also explored. Suzanne Neureiter considers the literary writings of pamphlets, treatises, and drama as the efforts made by the sixteenth and seventeenth century dwellers to define themselves and the surrounding world [7]. H.W. Herrington surveys the shifts and changes in various witchcraft plays, categorises them, and discusses the possible causes for these shifts and changes [2].

It is worth noting that most of the scholars recognise the distinctiveness of England in its participation in witch trials and witch hunts. According to Thomas, the crimes of witchcraft were treated "as consisting in positive acts of hostility to the community, rather than in relations with the Devil as such" [5] and that "the gravity of the offence depended upon the degree of the injury suffered by the witch's victims, not on any postulated covenant" (*ibid.*). Anderson and Gordon attribute England's uniqueness to the fact that the law and legal system was less elaborate and more lenient in the sixteenth and seventeenth century England and that women's social status was relatively higher in England than in other countries [4].

Although the feminist approach is adopted in various studies on witchcraft, they rarely consider witchcraft as a popular belief of the time; instead, they tend to judge the theme from a modern point of view. Likewise, studies focusing on the popular belief of witchcraft rarely touch the subject of patriarchal dominance and gender inequality. Therefore, this essay takes the

contemporary beliefs, both Christian and popular, into account when analysing the gender inequality presented in the Elizabethan and Jacobean witchcraft drama and considers the inequality as the product of the beliefs. Keeping the technique of combining the beliefs and feminism in mind, this essay is divided into three sections. The first section looks into the construction of the familiars, which is based on Christian teachings and reveals the political and gender perception in Reformation England; the second section discusses the different attitudes the playwrights and the society inflict on male and female magic users and concludes that female magic users are more maleficent; the final section reveals the patriarchal anxieties that existed in the society due to the female dominance that the alleged witches demonstrated, which rendered witchcraft to take the blame for the men's loss of control.

## 2. THE FAMILIARS

A witch's familiar, regarded as one of the presentations of the witch's mark, was believed to be an imp or a devil who took the form of an animal, usually a cat or a dog, and "who performed useful magical services for his mistress" [5]. Since the familiar was supposed to be given by the Devil himself, it displayed the witch's connection with the Devil. The belief in witches' employment of familiars was exclusively English, since the trials in England mostly focused on the damage the witches did, known as "maleficium" (ibid.), which was performed by the familiars under the command of the witches.

### 2.1. The Familiar and Christianity

Unlike the witches' destructive deeds, which often followed a commonly acknowledged list of deeds when presented on stage, the familiars were created with more liberty. Therefore, the shaping of the familiars sometimes carries the playwrights' and the mass' beliefs and their attitudes toward such beliefs, which can indicate the religious world they lived in.

The fact that the familiars display some features that are in accordance with the Christian teachings shows that the Christian belief served as one of the most prominent parts of their lives. The employment of familiars in drama itself is an open acknowledgement of the existence of hell and heaven. For example, Mephistophilis' account of damnation, "being depriv'd of everlasting bliss" [8], agrees with Christian theology in that according to Thomas Aquinas, the chief suffering of the damned is "the punishment of loss" [9]. The existence of familiars also proves that it is possible for the demonic creatures to roam the earth. When Faustus questions how Mephistophilis has managed to get out of hell, the familiar replies, "why, this is hell, nor am I out of it" [8]. Similar belief can be found in *Summa Theologica*, which states that demons are not confined in the fire of hell, but wherever they go, their punishment follows [10]; and it ensures their eternal confinement and sufferings in hell.

In some cases, playwrights would convey their attitudes toward Christianity through the familiars' appearances. In the case of Christopher Marlowe, he expressed his scepticism towards the Christian belief, and by doing so, he managed to praise humanism. Faustus' specific demand that the familiar should take the shape of a Franciscan friar [8] serves as a mockery of Christianity and expresses Marlowe's somewhat heretic objectives. Faustus' "that holy shape becomes a devil best" (ibid.) is apparently radical. The irony is also barely contained when Mephistophilis returns as a friar, uttering the same words that St Paul did upon his conversion to Christianity: "what wouldst thou have me do" [11]. By shaping his familiar in such a radical and heretic way, Marlowe conveyed his doubt for "the ordinary Tudor notions of man's relation to society and to God" [12] and his praise for human intellect, which could be witnessed from

Faustus' act of trading his soul for knowledge and his effort to rescue the scientist Bruno from the Church [8].

The existence of the familiar Mephistophilis not only serves to ridicule the general principles of Christianity, as most demonic creatures tend to do, but also illustrates the anti-Catholicism of the English Reformation. Mephistophilis' taking the shape of a Franciscan friar, who is supposed to be a member of the Catholic Church, can be considered as a mockery of the Catholic Church. Although St Francis, upon establishing the Order of Friars Minor (OFM), was denied of the authority to preach, he managed to gain approval of his rule in 1209 from Pope Innocent III; several decades later, OFM became a part of the papal government and contributed six popes to the church [13]. Thanks to the English Reformation, Marlowe's idea of making the devil wear the disguise of a Catholic friar was tolerated by the English society. Queen Elizabeth's repealing her predecessor Mary's Catholic legislation and "prohibiting foreign religious powers (i.e., the pope) from exercising any authority within England" by passing the 1559 Act of Supremacy [14] made it possible for the playwright to display his open ridicule against Rome, while the mass popularity of the play indicates the people's acceptance of England's break from Rome.

The familiars' existence and the fact that they are subject to the Christian teachings show that the centrality of Christianity to Renaissance English life. The fact that Mephistophilis' appearance as a Franciscan monk was well accepted by the mass audience demonstrates the mass' and the playwright's sceptic attitude toward Catholicism and indicates the background of English Reformation.

## 2.2. The Familiar and Popular Superstitions

Compared with Dr Faustus, a work completed during Elizabeth's reign, the Jacobean plays witness a shift in focus and put more emphasis on the recreation of certain real-life events. This makes the Jacobean plays better suited to portray the society where witches dwelled alongside common people, whose lives were heavily influenced by the popular superstitions of witchcraft, while such superstitions facilitated the incrimination of the unpopular members of the community.

Some of the popular beliefs are evident in the shaping of familiars. The description of explicit contracts, the ritual where a familiar comes into the possession of a witch, is carried out according to people's belief. Faustus is required to "write a deed of gift with (his) own blood" [8] by the devil and he "cut (his) arm, and with (his) proper blood/Assure (his) soul to be great Lucifer's" (ibid.). The contract between Mother Sawyer and her familiar Tom in *The Witch of Edmonton* is very much the same, as the dog asks Mother Sawyer to "make a deed of gift/Of soul and body" to him and "seal it with thy blood" [15]. According to Thomas, "such Faustian legends were in common circulation during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries", since "they made excellent cautionary tales, revealing Satan as a trickster and showing how his recruits always came to a bad end" [5]. Another notion that was "confidently believed in and frequently confessed" [2] is the sexual relationship between the witches and the familiars, which can be witnessed from multiple works. For instance, expressions such as "thou shall have the teat anon" and "kiss me, my Tommy,/And rub away some wrinkles on my brow/By making my old ribs to shrug for joy/Of thy fine tricks" [15] are exchanged constantly between Mother Sawyer and Tom. Interestingly, the fact that the playwrights enjoy shaping the familiars as a black dog may be the result of the belief that dogs were regarded as anti-God creatures, since the word "dog" is "God" spelt backwards.

Since real-life trials usually encountered the problem of missing evidences that linked the presumed witches with their maleficium, the familiars were created to serve as a connection between the cases and the witches. In *The Witch of Edmonton*, Mother Sawyer asks her familiar Tom the dog to “kill the slave” and to “work on his corn and cattle” and in turn the familiar promises her “when thou wishest ill,/Corn, man, or beast wouldst spoil or kill” (ibid.). Although Carter fails to present direct evidence when he accuses Mother Sawyer for bewitching Frank Thorney to kill his wife (ibid.), possessing a familiar who is perfectly capable of mischiefs naturally makes Mother Sawyer the suspect. The trial of Elizabeth Sawyer in history is highly identical to the description in the play in that both cases lack solid evidence. In the related historical event, Sawyer’s neighbour Agnes Ratcliffe died four days after her quarrel with Sawyer of a mysterious illness [1]. Unfortunately, Sawyer’s witch-like appearance, having only one eye and a hunched back (ibid.), as well as the mysterious nature of Ratcliffe’s death convinced the community that she murdered Ratcliffe by means of witchcraft. Because of the superstitions, unpopular members of the community were often accused of practising witchcraft when misfortune happened; as a result, a familiar became a necessary component to connect the unpopular accused with the charges.

The writings about the familiars reveal the religious background, people’s superstitions, and their lives in the sixteenth and seventeenth century England. The belief in the Christian teachings e.g. the existence of hell and the possibility of the Devil roaming the earth, together with the superstition of the capabilities of diabolical powers in damaging people’s lives contributed to forming the popular belief of familiars. It can be observed from the dramatic employment of familiars that such belief exerted some influences, such as simplifying the incrimination of the unpopular people, in the society. Since the familiars only carry out what their masters command, the commanders’ characteristics can be observed through the familiars and the deeds they are made to perform.

### **3. MALE AND FEMALE MAGIC USERS**

Although the means of performing mischiefs are similar for different witches, their intentions vary. In Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, men and women are presented as two different kinds of magic users: scholarly magicians and maleficent witches. The popular belief regarding the differences between male and female magic users is reflected in the design of the characters in these plays, while the design further reveals people’s perceptions of gender differences and the different lives for men and women in the Elizabethan and Jacobean England.

#### **3.1. Scholarly Magicians and Maleficent Witches**

Early Modern literary works tend to shape women and men into different kinds of magic users. Male magic users are mostly presented as scholars and banished noblemen, who are willing to trade their souls for unsanctioned knowledge or to retain social status; whilst their female counterparts are constructed as maleficent witches, who are either unpopular crones or female usurpers of power in a community. Such construction of the characters may stem from contemporary popular belief, which includes the occult powers of written documents and women’s frailty when facing diabolical powers.

In these works, male magic users are usually learned men, they use books or parchments in the conjuring process, and they are not exactly malefic. Faustus is described as a fruitful scholar who “profits in divinity”, has been shortly “grac’d with doctor’s name”, and is “Excelling all, and sweetly can dispute/In th’ heavenly matters of theology” [8], whereas Prospero is reputed for

“the liberal arts,/Without a parallel: those being all (his) study” [16]. Being learned scholars, they see magic as a study that is yet to be conquered and the forbidden nature of “secret studies” (ibid.) attracts them. For them, magic is “a science, an art, practised like the other learned professions, and mastered only after the most arduous and prolonged study” [2]. The scholarly understanding of magic leads them to study written documents for secret knowledge. Books thus become a tool in their magical practice. For instance, in order to conjure, Faustus is asked to “bear wise Bacon’s and Abanus’ works” [8]. The necessity of books in magical practice can also be seen from Prospero’s act to drown his book as a determination to give up magic [16]. Since the male magic users claim to take up magic for the sake of knowledge, they often justify their use of magic in this way. Faustus uses magic to gain access to the grandeur of knowledge and to travel the world, while Prospero uses it to gain his rightly place as the Duke of Milan. Their mischiefs such as invisibly snatching the Pope’s dish and cup and singing into other characters’ ears to affect their mood are more like tricks than maleficium in that no real harm ever comes from their magic.

In contrast to the scholarly image of male magic users, their female counterparts are perceived to be harmful to both their community and the society. Instead of being a well-off and learned person like Faustus and Prospero, Mother Sawyer is “poor, deformed, and ignorant” [15]. The maleficium that she is accused of performing are evidently more malignant compared with the sorcerers, for she is believed to have bewitched the cattle and corn in her community, her neighbours themselves, their servants, and their babies (ibid.). The multiple witches from *The Late Lancashire Witches* disrupt the social hierarchical order by using impotent charms, bewitching the community, and more importantly, following a woman’s lead [17]. Other maleficium they perform are equally destructive. For example, Mrs Generous, one of the witches, turns one of the villagers, Robin, into a horse and rides him to Sabbath, where she and her fellow witches feast on the food stolen from Parnell and Lawrence’s wedding (ibid.). Since their intentions are either for revenge, like Mother Sawyer, or for fun, like the witches in *The Late Lancashire Witches*, nothing in their practice of witchcraft deserves an absolution.

The division between male and female magic users in literary works probably stems from people’s belief in the relation between witchcraft and written documents. The reason for portraying male magic users as learned scholars lies in the relatively higher literacy rate of the male population in Early Modern England and the popular belief that written documents contain occult powers. Such belief was especially evident in the witchcraft pamphlets of the Jacobean period, which made explicit claims about the connection between men and witchcraft learned from books [18]. According to Keith Thomas, “literacy in Early Modern England consisted of a complicated hierarchy of increasingly difficult and rare skills, and few people made their way all the way up to the top”, since “those who could read print could not necessarily read written hand, and those who read written hand could not necessarily write” [19]. In order to master the secret of magic, it was necessary for sorcerers to understand not only printed books but also manuscripts. In a society where literate people were a scarcity, written documents carried a sense of mystery, not to mention the fact that they could give whoever was able to understand them the power of knowledge. Hence, the witch finder John Stearne believed “witches (conjurors) were addicted to the reading and studie of dangerous books” because “curiosity of knowledge, if reason and Arte faile, will ... move men to seeke help of a Spirit ... to draw them into the pit of Magick, Sorcery and Witchcraft” [20]. Since the vast majority of women were incapable of neither reading nor writing [21], the role of sorcerer in literature is almost always male and scholarly, and they are able to conjure and chant according to the lines in books, while such practices are never attributed to women.

Compared with men, who were drawn to witchcraft because of their scholarly desires, women were believed to be attracted to witchcraft because of their frailty against temptation. In King James' *Daemonologie*, it is noted that the female sex "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" [22]. Unlike the male magic users, who willingly embraced the esoteric art, women's enrolment in witchcraft signified the loss of their own will, rendering them as vessels to carry out the Devil's will. Hence, a female magic user's maleficium was believed to be more destructive than her male counterpart's.

The popular beliefs that written documents contained occult powers and that women were more likely to fall into the Devil's snare contributed to the shaping of the magic users in literature. Through the comparison between male and female magic users in the plays and the popular beliefs, it can be concluded that in people's perceptions, women were believed to be less educated and weaker-minded than men.

### 3.2. Which is Guiltier: Maleficent Deeds or Pacts with the Devil?

In these plays, all the female magic users, whether they are attractive leaders like Mistress Generous or unpopular crones like Mother Sawyer, end up facing the trials and executions set up by their community, while male magic users are left alone by the society: Faustus only has to answer to himself, taking the consequence of signing the pact and Prospero even manages to arrive at a happy ending. The male magicians' success, even though it is achieved with the help of magic, is celebrated by those around them. The different attitudes taken up towards the two kinds of cases reveal that in the sixteenth and seventeenth century England, maleficium were believed to be guiltier than the actual contract with the Devil.

The gender and the social status of the accused in the real world are in accordance with the design in the literary works and the popular belief. The male magic users were inclined to be of middling status and literate, while the magic they practise was believed to be harmless. In Essex, 58% of the accused men were professional, artisans or yeomen [18]. The belief that the art of magic was no more than another field of study gave scholarly witchcraft a harmless image, since the uses of magic to find hidden treasures, make magical solutions, and do researches in occult sciences were not perceived as dangerous by the society. This belief made it possible for scholars to take up the profession of a legitimated practising magician. The legitimacy indicates that the profession was not considered guilty even though it involved magic. One of the most reputed legitimated magicians was Dr John Dee, who once assisted Edmund Hunt to locate the buried treasure and obtain the necessary paperwork to dig it up (*ibid.*). However, since it required the ability to read to be a legitimated magician, there was hardly any chance left for women, lest they were aristocracy, e.g. Mary Sidney, who was accepted as an alchemist.

Although it was believed that a compact with the Devil was required to practise magic, the existence of the legitimated magicians proves that the association with the Devil alone was not regarded as guilty in the eyes of the English people. It is true that the Roman Catholic Church and the *Malleus Maleficarum*, one of the literature of demonology that outlines "the manner in which the witches or devil-worshippers were thought to conduct themselves" and lays down "the procedure for their prosecution", declared the essence of witchcraft as heretical Devil worship and maleficium a by-product of the heresy, the notion that Devil worship was more central to witchcraft than maleficium still experienced a slow acceptance in continental Europe [5]. In England, where there was no "Inquisition and no Roman Law" and where "Papal authority... was much reduced", witchcraft was regarded as an activity rather than a heretical belief (*ibid.*).

As a result, acts of Devil worship such as attending the witch's Sabbath and the practice of scholarly magic such as locating hidden treasure or studying the art of magic were rarely accused, let alone put on trials.

Compared with the educated male magic users, the female magic users were more likely to be poorer commoners and the magic they practise were regarded to be a lot more harmful than men's. Still in Essex, 46.9% of the accused women were wives of labourers and 22.4% were of husbandmen; both ranked low on social hierarchy [18]. The alleged activities of a witch, who was more often a woman, included causing physical injuries or death to other people and farm animals, "preventing cows from giving milk", and "frustrating such domestic operations as making butter, cheese, or beer" [5]. Performing these maleficium was not in need of books; rather, it called for diabolical will and intervention. This shows that the maleficent witches did not practise magic to gain knowledge; they practise magic because they gave themselves up to the temptation of the Devil. Sometimes, common witches formed a coven, which was usually "under the guidance of a leading female witch" [18] such as Mistress Generous in *The Late Lancashire Witches*. The notion of female leadership itself may be regarded as one of the maleficium, since it threatened the stability of the patriarchal society.

Since the demonic temptation initiated the maleficent witches' magical practice, the witches' intention and maleficium were believed to be socially destructive. As is mentioned, witchcraft was regarded as an activity; hence, the effect of the activity, which was evaluated by the extent of the deeds' destruction, played a more significant part in trials than the demonic pact. In fact, most of the accusations and trials of witchcraft were made based on the evidences of maleficium instead of the sightings of Devil worship or the speculation of heresy. In Essex, 70% of all the accusations involved human deaths or illnesses and most of the others were related to the injuries of the animals [5]. It is safe to assume that by law and in people's perceptions, maleficium was believed to be guiltier than pacts with the Devil, and that most female magic users were believed to be guiltier than their male counterparts.

It is fair to conclude that the notion of dividing magic users according to gender reveals the sixteenth and seventeenth century people's perceptions of the supposed female inferiority to man in spiritual matters; thus they were regarded as frailer against temptations and more likely to cause damage to the society. It is worth noting that the dichotomy is not the only matter that mirrored the society, the accusations and fear for the maleficent witches signified certain anxieties in the patriarchal society.

#### **4. THE MALEFICIUM**

Witches' maleficium posed dangers to the society in various ways, such as endangering other people's properties and lives. Some maleficium was even perceived as a threat to the supposed dignity of masculinity and the stability of the patriarchal society. However, at the same time, these maleficium might come in handy when men needed an excuse to mask their loss of control. Two of the most representative maleficium in revealing patriarchal anxieties are the making of impotence charms and the establishment of female dominance.

##### **4.1. Impotence Charms**

The employment of impotence charms in plays reflects not only the popular belief that witchcraft was capable of causing erectile dysfunction but also the patriarchal perception that women were responsible for men's loss of their virility.



The impotence charms found on stage are mostly presented as a knot. For example, in *The Late Lancashire Witches*, the word “point” in the witch Mall’s line “I’ll hold close him this point on’t” [17], meaning “lace, usually made of leather and with a metal tip called an aglet, for tying one’s clothing together” [17], indicates a magic knot. In *The Witch*, the magic properties of the knot is presented through Hecate’s words: “knit with these charmed and retentive knots,/Neither the man begets nor woman breeds;/No, nor performs the least desires of wedlock” [23]”. The descriptions of the impotence charms reflect the belief that “tying a magic knot into a ring or a key using cord or a strip of leather, and then hiding it, caused impotence of the groom at a wedding” [24]. It is possible that the idea of blaming witchcraft for sexual dysfunction was constructed as a means to seek answers to something people failed to understand scientifically at the time. When people encountered something they could not explain, they were prone to turn to religions or superstitions for answers. The case remained the same in blaming a sexually active man’s impotence on witches’ conduct, because “according to Thomas Aquinas and the authors of the notorious *Malleus Maleficarum*, even God had it in for men, actually allowing Satan to prevent intercourse by way of witches who had been recruited mainly for that purpose” [25]. It was not until the eighteenth century, when scientific explanations for impotence such as “the problems of diet, regimen, and excesses” were widely accepted, did the Christian notion that “sexual problems were sign of man’s fallen state” and that “even the innocent might be bewitched” cease to be popular [26].

In addition to the belief that witches were responsible, blaming impotence on witchcraft was an act to shift the blame of men’s loss of dignity on women. Since the humiliating jokes about sexual inadequacy were developed in male culture [27], the men who had erectile problems were faced with the pressure of being judged, humiliated, and made fun of by the community. To avoid losing their masculine dignity, they tended to blame their impotence on witchcraft, as is shown in the plays. The character Lawrence from *The Late Lancashire Witches*, who is commonly acknowledged to be sexually active before marriage but turns out to be impotent on the wedding night, encounters humiliating jokes and discussions such as “he’s out of a doing case” and “you must get half a dozen bastards within this twelvemonth, and that will mend your next marriage” [17] the next morning. The notion that a number of bastards are able to mend one’s marriage indicates that dignified men were expected to be always performable and fertile, and should they fail to reach such expectations, they were bound to be a laughing stock of the local community. Such discussions were more embarrassing and humiliating than the impotence itself, since it marked not only the loss of dominance over his wife but also the loss of honour in his whole social circle. To make the humiliation more bearable, the impotent men were likely to choose to believe in diabolical intervention or blame their insufficiency on witchcraft. In cases similar to the one of Lawrence, where the men were capable with other women but impotent with their wives, the involvement of witchcraft could serve as a useful excuse that was able to save their manhood and pose them as victims of witchcraft.

In plays, not only can witchcraft cause men’s impotence with their wives, it can also lead to a change in men’s sexual orientation. In addition to the current connotation of erectile dysfunction, the meaning of the word “impotence” could also include “problems with sexual orientation” in the Early Modern period [27]. Thus, the love potions that caused homosexuality were also included in impotence charms. In John Fletcher’s *The Humorous Lieutenant*, after the Lieutenant, who used to run away from men in honourable combats, accidentally drinks the magic love potion intended for Celia, he “is really in love with the King, most doatingly” [28]. So madly is he in love with the King that he will “as familiarly kisse the Kings horses/As they passe by him: ready to ravish his footmen” (ibid.). In reality, based on the belief that witchcraft

could alter a person's sexual preference, witchcraft was also used by homosexual men as a way to hide their sexual orientation. One of the ways to achieve this purpose was to declare hostility toward witches, as is done by King James I. Despite the opposition from the church, King James firmly claimed that causing impotence "was one of the basic diabolic interventions" [26]. It can be boldly assumed that King James' firm claim against all oppositions might have something to do with concealing his sexual orientation. Out of the affection for Lennox, who was one of James' minions and was observed embraced and kissed by James in public [29], James reorganized the Bedchamber according to the fashion in the French court under Henry III, which was "notorious for the alleged sexual relations between the king and his minions" [30]. Right after his marriage, James published *Daemonologie*, triggered by a woman's revelation of "the very words that had passed between him and Anne on their wedding night" [31]. Three years later, after James' narrow escape of murder in the Gowrie Conspiracy, where James was lured by a young man called Alexander Ruthven under the promise of "gold" (some have suggested that, instead of gold, it was sex that lured James) into "a small, secluded, upstairs room" [31], Queen Anne "spoke sharply to him" and threatened to "remain in some part by herself" (ibid.). Judging from his inappropriate interactions with Lennox and Ruthven and the publication of *Daemonologie* right after his marriage, it was possible that James blamed witchcraft for his lack of response with women, while using it to conceal his preference for men.

The employment of impotent charms in plays reflects the belief that witchcraft is responsible for men's sexual incapability and homosexuality; both signify the loss of manly honour. Thus, witchcraft serves as an excuse for men to avoid the humiliation that comes with the loss of their dignity. It further indicates that women took the blame for men's problems at that time.

#### 4.2. Female Dominance

In Jacobean plays, female dominance is presented through the effect of impotence charms and female leadership. Both maleficium display men's anxiety of losing control, which might lead to the fear of women taking over, since female dominance was believed to disrupt the current patriarchal stability.

Sometimes, applying impotence charms might be considered as a step to establish female dominance, since it became the wife's job to decide whether the marriage is valid or not. Parnell's threat to be "unwedded again" [17] indicates that divorce could be achieved if the husband had proved to be impotent. It mirrors the reality that "marriages could be dissolved" in the seventeenth century if "trials of congress" were able to prove the husband's impotence [25]. However, "impotence was the only grounds for divorce" [24], and the emphasis on "only" can be seen from Hecate's incapability to disjoin wedlock directly in another contemporary play *The Witch*, while only the impotence charm could "part 'em utterly" [23]. Applying impotent charms to men could enable the wives to power over their husbands in the household, which was a unit of the society, and this was enough to trigger fear and anxiety in men.

What brought more horror to men was their belief that women's rule would cause chaos. According to the plays, in some of the witch's covens, female leadership was already established, but the descriptions of their gathering and their influence on the society were far from orderly or virtuous. In *The Late Lancashire Witches*, the gathering under the leadership of Mrs Generous successfully breeds thieves, a traitor, and chaos while oppressing men at the same time: the witches feast on the food and drinks that they have stolen; one of the only two male participants is turned into a horse and the other is a small boy who consumes little and tastes nothing; the boy manages to steal away under the chaos of the feast and turns out to be a traitor

[17]. The influence of women's rule on the society is described as even more disastrous. When the witches control the society, they make the children in the Seely family lord over their parents, and the servants overpower their masters (ibid.). As the newly wed servant of the Seely family, Lawrence's impotence is seen as "the inability to exert dominance" [27] and it gives Parnell an excuse to lord over her husband, so that the final piece for the craziness of the Seely family falls into place. The "exaggerated picture of gender disorder" presented by Parnell's "aggressive dominance over her impotent husband" [32] is able to cause even more disorder after the shifts of authority among other family members. In addition to the chaotic wedding party, the upsetting of order in the Seely family brings more chaos to the story, indicating that witches were capable of turning the world upside down. Since impotence charms could place the decision to terminate a marriage in the wife's hand and that female leadership meant women could overrule men, the acts of seeing them as maleficium and defacing women's rule indicate men's anxiety for losing their dominant position over women.

From the literary descriptions of the impotence charms and female leadership, two of the most representative maleficium in witchcraft plays, the patriarchal anxieties of losing the male honor and forfeiting control over women can be observed. In order to maintain their dignity and dominance, the men blamed witchcraft for putting them in compromising situations.

### **3. CONCLUSIONS**

The witchcraft plays produced during the Elizabethan and Jacobean era unravel not only witchcraft's role as a popular belief but also the perceptions and lives, which were under the influence of the popular belief of witchcraft, of the people in sixteenth and seventeenth century England.

The popular belief of witchcraft generally consists of three parts: the familiars who perform magic; the magic users, who give commands to the familiars; and the maleficium, the magic tricks themselves.

This thesis first focuses on the dramatic employment of familiars. From the descriptions of familiars, people's perceptions of Christianity can be observed; their perceptions and attitudes toward Christianity reveal the historical background of English Reformation. The literary exploitations of this element also display the popular belief that the familiars served as a connection between witches and the Devil, which influenced people's lives in the way that the unpopular members of a community could be incriminated merely by sightings of animals around them.

The different ways of portraying male and female magic users indicate the perception that women were more weak-minded than men. They also depict the popular belief that women were more likely to subject to demonic temptations and thus female magic users were guiltier than their male counterparts. Such belief influenced people's lives in the way that more women were put on trial and executed for witchcraft than men, and the male magic users were usually free from the trials and executions since they were not considered guilty.

The maleficium such as impotence charms and following a woman's leadership are frequently exploited by the witchcraft dramas. The relevant writings expose the belief that witchcraft could cause impotence, whether it was erectile dysfunction or homosexuality; both of the situations threatened male dominance. They also reveal the patriarchal perceptions that women were to blame for men's loss of virility and that female leadership could cause chaos to the society.

This essay combines the contemporary beliefs with feminist notions in its analysis of these three elements. Although the belief did entail gender discrimination in claiming that women were more susceptible to diabolical influences, it was not so extreme as to claiming all female were guilty while all male were not. In fact, a small number of men had indeed become victims of the witch hunt. Understanding the popular belief correctly may even bring some insights to the modern adaptation of the Elizabethan and Jacobean plays. For example, the familiar Ariel from *The Tempest* has been performed by both male and female actors in modern times, depicting that both men and women can be vessels for the Devil, although Shakespeare used “him” as Ariel’s pronoun in the text.

Therefore, the understanding of the belief that the male gender could also be influenced by diabolical powers may enlighten future studies on the theatrical performances and modern adaptations of the sixteenth-and-seventeenth-century drama, since the gender of certain casts may serve as supplementary materials in understanding the Elizabethan and Jacobean society or reflect the changes in people’s perceptions during the centuries. This essay may also provide insights on the studies of future literature and society, such as the Victorian literature and society, whose Gothic literature and certain social values may have stemmed from the Elizabethan and Jacobean belief of witchcraft and its misogynist and double-standard perceptions of gender.

Witchcraft elements can be found in a number of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays. Analysing the dramatic descriptions of the familiars, the magic users, and the maleficium thus provides us with a window into the Early Modern English people’s perceptions and lives under the influence of the popular belief of witchcraft.

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