

Witch Panic: Daemonology In England [B2]

La caccia alle streghe fu un fenomeno che vide ampiamente coinvolta la figura del re noto come Giacomo I d'Inghilterra e Giacomo VI di Scozia, e che fu fortemente condizionato dall'avvento della stampa. Entrambi gli elementi contribuirono alla durissima persecuzione di molte donne accusate di praticare la stregoneria: andiamo a vedere per quali ragioni.



Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.” This verse from Exodus 22:18 was translated into English by [commission](#) of King James I in 1604, a king who felt he had much to fear from [witchcraft](#). By the time James’s Bible was published in 1611, the [wildfire](#) of witch panic had already been [burning its way](#) across Europe for well over a hundred years. The book that [kindled](#) this persecution of witches was not James’s Bible, but the Malleus Maleficarum.

DEMONOLOGY

Written by a German Catholic clergyman called Heinrich Kramer and published in 1486, the Malleus Maleficarum (latin for ‘Hammer of Witches’) was a compendium of existing literature on demonology. At a time when

European witch [trials](#) were increasing rapidly in number, it provided a guide to the crime of [witchcraft](#), suggesting various methods of torture as the best way to obtain confessions and elevating [witchcraft](#) to the criminal status of [heresy](#). As a result, the only plausible [punishment](#) was the death penalty. Much like the impact of social media today, the recent invention of the [printing press](#) meant that published works could [spread](#) more quickly than ever before. In fact, there were twenty-eight editions of the Malleus published between 1486 and 1600. At a time of religious [strife](#), the fact that the book was an authoritative source of information about Satanism was one of the few things Catholics and Protestants agreed on.

THE WITCH-HUNTERS

It's not surprising then that in 1590, when King James almost died in a storm while crossing the North Sea with his Danish [bride](#) Anne, his first thought was that he had been the victim of a conspiracy of witches. This idea was apparently confirmed by a woman accused of [witchcraft](#) named Agnes Sampson, who, under torture, 'confessed' that on Halloween night 1590, two hundred witches had sailed across the sea in sieves to the Scottish coastal town of North Berwick, where the devil had [encouraged](#) them [to plot](#) against the king.

WITCHES AND CATHOLICS

From that moment James [sanctioned](#) witch [trials](#) and made [witchcraft](#) the focus of his attention. In 1597, the king wrote his Daemonologie, a compendium on [witchcraft lore](#) and a philosophical account of demonology and the methods demons used to provoke men. This book, which provided some of the material for Shakespeare's description of the [Weird Sisters](#) in Macbeth, explained how the devil worked in the world, making pacts with people and giving them [harmful](#) magical powers. In 1603 the kingdoms of Scotland and England unified with James ruling both. Although Guy Fawkes and the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 had the effect of diverting James's attention away from [witchcraft](#) conspiracies and towards Catholic conspiracies, witch

panic was already [spreading](#) and it got worse in the decades that followed the unification.

THE WITCH-FINDER GENERAL

[Enter one](#) Matthew Hopkins, an impoverished lawyer with a strong puritanical background, who, during the chaos and religious [upheaval](#) of the English Civil Wars, made it his mission to restore calm by destroying anything to do with the so-called “works of the devil”. The beginnings of his career as a witch-hunter are quite vague, but in 1644 he apparently [overheard](#) some women discussing their meetings with the devil in the town of Manningtree, Essex, where he lived. Twenty-three women were accused of [witchcraft](#) and of these, nineteen were later [convicted](#) and [hanged](#). Hopkins had discovered his vocation. Between the years 1644 and 1646, he and his associates are thought to have been responsible for the deaths of three hundred women. In 1645 he assumed the title of Witch-Finder General and, in 1647, he added to the literature on the subject by publishing a short pamphlet about his witch-hunting methods, The Discovery of Witches.

Glossary

- **spread** = espandersi
- **bride** = sposa
- **sanctioned** = autorizzare
- **overheard** = sentire per caso
- **hanged** = impiccare
- **burning its way** = farsi strada bruciando terreno (figurativo)
- **punishment** = punizione
- **to plot** = cospirare
- **convicted** = condannare
- **trials** = processi
- **encouraged** = incitare
- **wildfire** = incendio a macchia d'olio
- **heresy** = eresia
- **printing press** = stampa
- **strife** = conflitto, lotta
- **Weird Sisters** = le sorelle fatali (lett. strane)
- **Enter one** = entra in scena un certo
- **commission** = incarico
- **witchcraft** = stregoneria
- **upheaval** = rivolta
- **harmful** = nocivi
- **kindled** = accendere, fornire una scintilla
- **lore** = tradizioni, folclore