How might Shakespeare's audience respond to a woman seeking power?

**Jacobean Women**

During the period in which Shakespeare wrote Macbeth, there were distinct societal expectations about the roles of men and women.

Lady Macbeth is a sinister figure: at the very outset she deliberately tries to suppress her feminine qualities in order to excercise power.

Some women in the Renaissance were able to acquire an education; many managed properties as widows, or when their husbands were away; and in the background there were the extraordinary examples of Queen Elizabeth and Mary, Queen of Scots--the one admired, the other feared by many.

Although society expected women to be submissive to their husbands, Lady Macbeth not only subverts this idea of complete submission, but also decisively challenges her husband’s masculinity. To attain power, she seeks to subdue her feminine characteristics in order to become more masculine. In doing so, she hopes to find the courage to kill the king and so become queen.

The concept of equality between the sexes would have seemed very foreign to most in Shakespeare’s day: Adam was created first, and Eve from his body; she was created specifically to give him comfort, and was to be subordinate to him, to obey him and to accept her lesser status. A dominant woman was unnatural, a symptom of disorder.

**Witchcraft**

People living in Jacobean times held vastly different beliefs and opinions to people today. Though our world is often chaotic we rely on our ability to find complex explanations for unusual or unfortunate occurrences. In the pre-Christian world, belief in witches and their magical powers, was deeply grounded in the minds of people in the European world. As Christianity became more established, the misdeeds of the Devil became associated with witches, who were thought to be acting as his agents.
Witches were associated with the dark and death. In Christian countries they were thought to be the agents of Satan going about their business at night, and they were believed to gather near graves to conduct their evil rites and make poisons.

When Shakespeare wrote Macbeth, witchcraft was a topic of considerable interest. The new king of England, James I, had written a book called Demonology which was published in 1597. Until the time of Queen Elizabeth, no-one could be executed simply for being a witch. But in 1604, witchcraft became a capital offence. Evidence of a relationship with evil spirits condemned a suspect to death by hanging, burning or drowning. Whether Shakespeare himself believed in witches does not matter. He used them for his play, and many of his audience would have believed in them as thoroughly evil servants of the devil. For the people of Shakespeare’s time, the devil was very real who they believed spent his time trying to trap men and women into his power. Note that very early in the play Banquo realises this and says as much to Macbeth.

Witches were supposed to be capable of doing all the things that the three weird sisters are said to perform in Macbeth. It was believed that they could see into the future; that they could create storms, hail, thunder and lightning; that they were able to sink ships; dry up springs; stop the sun and change night into day and day into night. They could also cause the death of their enemies, and could make themselves invisible. In order to work their charms they would open graves and steal parts of the bodies to make potions. For this purpose the bodies of unbaptized babies were especially prized. And witches could call up the dead.

For a king like Macbeth or for Lady Macbeth to visit and have dealings with witches would have seemed both a crime and a sin for a Shakespearean audience.
The Role of Women in Jacobean Society

- Avid follower of religion.
- Supposed to be pious and pure.
- Mothers and care-givers.
- Completely against violence of any sort.
- Ruled first by their fathers and then by their husbands.
- Obeyed their husbands/fathers every decision.
- Ruled first by their fathers and then by their husbands.