

# Social and cultural context in "macbeth" essay sample

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Macbeth is set in 11th century Scotland, which during this time was a violent and troubled country. Murders and political revenge were not unusual. The weak foundations of society made crime a “ joyful trouble”. There were battles between relatives and clans to determine the ownership of land or trade. In the play, the witches chant, “ Fair is foul and foul is fair” which suggests the collapse of all that is good and the triumph of evil. Macbeth is a study of the tragic consequences that befall a once “ valiant” man whose thirst for power fuelled by the regicide of the King becomes nothing but a “ dead butcher”.

One King who took great interest in the supernatural world was King James I of England, who was also King James VI of Scotland. King James came onto the throne in 1603. In 1590, a group of witches allegedly attempted to kill him. Their plan had been to poison the king with toad venom and to conjure a storm to sink the king’s ship. King James was fascinated by witchcraft and even wrote a book called Demonology, which of course focused on the supernatural. Macbeth was supposedly performed before the King in 1606. On a visit to Oxford, three witches approached King James. They hailed him as the descendant of Banquo; Banquo never existed in real life. Banquo was created merely to heighten the evil within Macbeth that drove him to murder. Shakespeare was aware of his audience so he made Banquo an alleged ancestor of King James I to capture not only the public, but the King as well.

It also has references to events outside of the play in England during Shakespeare's time. This shows that Shakespeare was aware of how he could link the play with more recent happenings so that the audience can relate more easily. James I took interest in the play because it explored the regicide of a king and he himself was a king. The Gunpowder plot is mentioned during the play in Act 2 scene 3, line 50 as "dire combustion". One of the men involved in the plot, Everard Digby was favoured by the King but turned out a traitor, as did the Thane of Cawdor in Macbeth. It is also linked to Macbeth because it was another planned regicide but is different because the plan failed.

During Shakespeare's time witchcraft was very common and greatly believed in. In the 1580s, 13% of Essex crimes involved witchcraft. So Shakespeare used the witches as dramatic devices to show Scotland's "turbulent times", they are "instruments of darkness". Witches were believed to have many powers and many of these are mentioned in the play as when the first witch says, "But in a sieve I'll thither sail," or when the witches vanish like bubbles after Macbeth questions them as to how they know what the future holds. They could also control the weather, "Though you untie the winds and let them fight, against the churches". They work against the churches their very beings are against all that is good and holy. They are an evil trinity that causes destruction, luring Macbeth into "deepest consequence".

Banquo describes the witches in negative terms, "withered", "wild" with "choppy fingers" and "skinny lips". All of these images lack femininity, which

indicates sexual ambivalence. Their ugliness indicates danger because "foul is fair and fair is foul". Banquo also questions their origins when he says "look not like inhabitants o'th' earth, and yet are on it?" which implies that they are supernatural beings not of this earth. The way they are perceived by others in the play was also how the audience in real life would see them, for example, the sailor's wife sees them as witches and not as sisters. The witches themselves see each other as sisters, as in scene 2 where the soldiers see each other as brothers. Macbeth greets them as "secret black midnight hags" in Act 4 scene 5 because they are "instruments of darkness" whose hideous haggard looks indicate an evil side to their ambivalent characters. He greets them again in Act 5 scene 8 as "juggling fiends" when he refuses to believe them anymore. The witches are portrayed differently by the characters, which highlight the many aspects of their characters. This increases their peculiarity and unsettles the audience.

Another power that the witches possess is that they can predict the future. In 1606, a Catholic priest, Henry Garnet was charged with treason. He was proved to have committed perjury during court hearings but argued that it was his right to equivocate in self-defence. However, the witches use their knowledge of the future to whip up trouble. They manipulate the truth so that the person in question hears their future the way they want it to be, they tell equivocal prophecies. For example, the witches hail Macbeth as future King of Scotland but in order to be king he must kill the predecessor. But they do not tell Macbeth that he must kill, they imply his future and he infers the murder.

Macbeth becomes rapt in their " prophet-like" ways but Banquo doubts them. Banquo sees the witches as " instruments of darkness" which means that they are servants of the devil. He warns Macbeth in Act I scene 3 by saying that by accepting the Thane ship he is betraying himself. Banquo can see the way the witches are luring Macbeth into the idea of kingship by predicting his Thane ship and tells Macbeth, " Win us with honest trifles, to betray in deepest consequence." Banquo is warning Macbeth that the witches cannot be trusted because these truths are too good to be true so there must be an evil consequence. However, Macbeth is more ambiguous about his feelings and would prefer to leave their predictions to chance by saying " If chance will have me king, why chance may crown me without my stir."

But driven by the witches' equivocal truths, Macbeth has already pre-meditated the murder of King Duncan as the audience hears his thoughts, " My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical, shakes so my single state of man that function is smothered in surmise". He does not share this disturbing thought with Banquo because it has already shook himself to the bone as the audience hears in Act 1 scene 3. The witches can easily influence Macbeth, this is enforced when Macbeth enters and greets the witches with " So foul and fair a day I have not seen" which was also used by the witches in Act I scene I. The witches deceive Macbeth with their " honest trifles" which adds to the temptation of the pre-meditated murder to " betray" him " in deepest consequence".

Shakespeare altered how some of the characters were portrayed.

Throughout Macbeth, Shakespeare portrays the King as a holy, respectable figure. But we know in truth that King Duncan wasn't held with high regard during his reign on Scotland. Shakespeare changed the King's character to a wise old mighty monarch to enforce the brutality and evil of Macbeth's actions. The regicide of the King has more impact because his character has been illustrated into being seen as a noble, wise and holy figure.

Shakespeare inflicts this idea of kingship as a precious and divine position by making the other characters think of the King with the highest regard. Lady Macbeth refers to the crown as a "golden round" and Macbeth says "He lay, his silver skin laced with his golden blood," when describing the state of King Duncan's dead body. Characters such as the witches work in opposition to the King's character by being unholy creatures of disorder.

Lady Macbeth serves as the evil instigator who urged Macbeth to murder King Duncan ruthlessly and could possibly be thought of as the fourth witch in the play. She first appears in Scene 5 in Act I. After having read Macbeth's letter she decides to try and encourage Macbeth to go through with the "deed" because she believes that he was not daring enough to murder the king. She says that his character "is too full o'th' milk of human kindness. She sees his kindness as a feminine quality, which would make it a weakness in a man. The powerful speech that she makes in the same scene asks the "murdering ministers" to "unsex" her by taking away her gentler "feminine" feelings and thickening her blood. During the speech she says the word "Come" three times like a chant, which suggest witchlike qualities because of

her dark thoughts. Light is a metaphor for all that is good as opposed to dark, which is a metaphor for wickedness. She demands the night the King is murdered to be thick without stars to banish good light in the midst of an evil happening.

Before and after the murder of the King, Macbeth shows enormous guilt, whereas his accomplice or "partner in greatness" feels no shame and has to assure Macbeth that he is overreacting to the murder. In Act 2 Scene 2 the conversation between these two characters reflects their emotions beautifully. Macbeth believes that he has murdered "innocent sleep", "Chief nourisher in life's feast". Macbeth cannot bear the sight of their bloodied hands, "What hands are here? Ha: they pluck out mine eyes" proof of the sacrilegious slaughter just committed. Macbeth is asking to wash his hands in "Neptune's ocean" so he can wash away the size of his guilt as well. But by washing his hands in the sea, he will make the sea red with his hands, "Making the green one red".

Lady Macbeth scolds him "My hands are of your colour, but I shame to wear a heart so white." their attitude to the murder is exemplified by Lady Macbeth needing only a "little water to clear us of this deed" and Macbeth needs the "multitudinous seas" to clear his conscience as well as his hands. Sleep and water are important in Act 2 Scene 2 because they are both good natural things as opposed to murder, which is of course an evil deed, which is associated with the supernatural because it is evil. Lady Macbeth tells him not to over exaggerate "These deeds must not be thought, after these ways; so, it will make us mad." But in the end Macbeth becomes a cold-

blooded killer and Lady Macbeth is the one who goes mad, starts sleepwalking and imagining that she is the one who cannot wash away the blood from her hands.

As the play progresses, Macbeth's " vaulting ambition", sparked by the witches prophecy in Act 1 scene 3 " All hail Macbeth thou shalt be king hereafter" drives him to ruthlessly murder more innocent lives. Banquo is his next victim who suspects him of the regicide. So Macbeth decides to kill the " gracious Banquo" to prevent him from unearthing any evidence that could be held against Macbeth. In Act 3 scene 1, the murder of Banquo is planned and Banquo is described as having a royal nature, wisdom and valour. This links his murder to the king because it depicts them as having the same traits. During a banquet, Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost and vows to kill anyone who dares stand in his way. He then visits the witches demanding to know his future. The witches call on three apparitions who tell warn Macbeth: " The power of man, for none of woman born shall harm Macbeth".

" Macbeth shall never vanquished be until Great Birnam Wood to high Dunisdane hill shall come against him" and beware of Macduff. Unfortunately Macbeth takes these equivocal truths at face value instead of their metaphorical meanings, he thinks he will come to no harm at all. The man who is not naturally born shall end Macbeth, in other words a man whose mother had a caesarean will kill Macbeth. Great Birnam wood is a forest in England, so how could it move to Scotland? Malcolm gathers troops in England; they know that in order to get into Macbeth's castle they need to



break it down. So they cut down trees from Great Birnam wood to ram down the door of his castle.

At the start of the play, Macbeth is portrayed as a hero, by the end he is nothing but a dead butcher. When he hears of Lady Macbeth's death he realises that what he has worked so hard to gain has truly amounted to nothing but material, unimportant worthless things.

“ Out, out, brief candle, Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player That struts and frets his hour upon the stage And then is heard no more. It is a tale Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing.” Macbeth's merciless ambition led him to become a heartless man with no feeling, in despair and nihilistic.

Macbeth has numerous major themes throughout the play that links both the plot and characters together as well as reinforcing characters and their actions and reactions. Tensions in the play also mirror tensions in society at that time. Stereotypical hierarchical men portrayed as violent and ruthless, “ I dare do all that may become a man” says Macbeth which reflects the great lengths men who go to further their status. Throughout the play there are references to historical events that happened during the time the play was being written. This is so that it appeals more to the audience and makes it easier for them to relate to the play. Equivocation is one of the main themes in Macbeth. The witches are a prime example of how equivocation is used in the play. The Supernatural world versus the rest of society shows the witches

being feared because of their powers but also being outcast and evil because of their differences.

During Shakespeare's time those who were thought to be witches were outcast and seen as "inhabitants not o'th' earth". The witches' half-truths drove Macbeth's ambition, which led to his ruin. Murderous intentions in the play to promote status reflected on the state of Scotland's political problems in real life in the eleventh century. "Fair is foul and foul is fair" shows the disorder of war and the influence of witches. Macbeth's aspirations caused his downfall and brought in the theme of broken trust and the struggle to maintain it. Macbeth started out as a "valiant" and "worthy cousin" only to conclude as a heartless "butcher", his decline was aided by the witches bittersweet "bodements" and persuasion of Lady Macbeth.