

BBC BITESIZE - MACBETH Episode 3

Carl: Hello, and welcome to the Bitesize English literature podcast. Now, you've clearly done something right because you've made it here. If you want to hear all the episodes in this podcast, make sure you download the BBC Sounds app.

Jean: And don't forget that whilst you're in the BBC Sounds app, there's loads of other things you can use to help you with your revision - full versions of some of the texts you might be studying, revision playlists and other Bitesize podcast series to help with different GCSE subjects.

Carl: I'm one of your hosts, Carl Anka, author and journalist.

Jean: And I'm Jean Menzies, ancient historian and author as well.

Carl: And in this episode, we're taking a closer look at more of the characters within Macbeth.

Jean: In this episode, we're going to find out more about the characters Banquo, Macduff and the witches. So let's get into it.

EXTRACT

Macbeth: Our fears in Banquo
Stick deep; and in his royalty of nature
Reigns that which would be fear'd: 'tis much he dares;
And, to that dauntless temper of his mind

Jean: So that's Macbeth talking about Banquo, his best friend at the start of the play. This quote is after Macbeth has killed Duncan though and Banquo was suspicious of him. Macbeth is thinking about what it is about Banquo that worries him and says he has a "royalty of nature".

Carl: Yes, and that means he's noble and loyal and trustworthy. In many ways Banquo is everything that Macbeth isn't. At least that's how Macbeth sees it. Right? Macbeth admits that Banquo's a risk-taker, but also that Banquo has the wisdom to act with care. And with prior thought.

Jean: Well, Banquo is another general in the king's army and is part of a successful battle at the beginning with Macbeth, where they're both fighting for the king. But whereas Macbeth spirals afterwards, due to the witches' prophecy and his need for power, Banquo was nothing to do with the murder plot and doesn't lose his brave and noble character.

Carl: Banquo is there in the initial prediction, when the witches are there. Banquo could very easily fall into the same spiral that Macbeth fell into. Because Banquo's sons are mentioned in these predictions. In fact, the witches tell Banquo that Banquo's sons will be the heir to the throne, immediately after

Macbeth. So Banquo's ambition for his children could have made him go the same murderous way, but it doesn't at all.

Jean: No and I think it's because he's a lot more suspicious of what the witches are saying than Macbeth, and he doesn't just automatically take it as fact. He asks more questions about their motives and why they're being told this.

EXTRACT

Banquo: That trusted home
Might yet enkindle you unto the crown,
Besides the thane of Cawdor. But 'tis strange:
And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles, to betray's
In deepest consequence.

Carl: Banquo realises straight away that hearing the prophecies has put a spark in Macbeth. Macbeth's acting different since the prophecies and kindled, if you're Shakespeare, this ambitious streak within Macbeth. And Banquo is... he doesn't love it. It's his best mate, remember.

Jean: He takes a different approach to the prophecies where Macbeth, who's almost blinded by the power of the offer. If you listen to Banquo here, he refers to them as "honest trifles", acknowledging that they are temptations that only reveal part of the truth, and that they're set as a trap for some kind of greater significance.

Carl: "To betray in deepest consequence." Banquo smart, that's something that's being constantly brought up throughout the play. Banquo's sharp and aware of what's going on. He's the first one to suspect Macbeth in the murder of Duncan. And that's ultimately his undoing, as Macbeth decides to have him killed, although Banquo's son manages to escape the murder.

Jean: Even in death that isn't the end of Banquo though - he appears to Macbeth as a ghost. And we don't really know if he's there or not - is he real or an apparition? This is a great example of how Shakespeare leaves things open to interpretation. Either way, he's used by Shakespeare to show the guilt and troubled mind that Macbeth has been left with after the murders he has committed.

Carl: I think if I had to describe Banquo, I'd say he's noble, loyal, and questioning.

Jean: I agree, an honourable man and one I've enjoyed learning more about. I wonder if you'll feel the same about Macduff - shall we take a look at him now?

EXTRACT

Malcolm: Macduff, this noble passion,
Child of integrity, hath from my soul
Wiped the black scruples, reconciled my thoughts

To thy good truth and honour ... for even now
I put myself to thy direction, and
Unspeak mine own detraction

Jean: So this is King Duncan's son Malcolm describing Macduff in Act 4, scene 3. What do we already know about Macduff?

Carl: Okay, I'm gonna do a little bit of a Macduff breakdown for you. Are you ready to grab a pen and paper if you need to jot down some notes because no one has said that this is very straightforward.

So number one, Macduff is the Thane of Fife.

Number two, he's very loyal to King Duncan.

Number three. Macduff is the person who found King Duncan's body after Macbeth had murdered King Duncan.

Number four. Macduff does not trust Macbeth when Macbeth blames King Duncan's death on the servants.

Number five. Macduff becomes Malcolm's chief supporter. When Malcolm - now remember Malcolm is King Duncan's son - runs off to England.

Number six, in the extract we've just heard, Macduff has gone to England to join Malcolm and raise an army against Macbeth.

And number seven. This obviously then makes Macduff Macbeth's deadly enemy, which wasn't always the case. Okay, so overall, at this point, Macduff is very loyal to King Duncan and his heir, Malcolm. So he wants to help Malcolm reclaim the throne.

Jean: Yeah, a lot has happened before this moment. In fact, I think this is a great time to just pause and do a little bit of a reminder that sometimes it's really helpful to note down key characters' names, or relisten back to moments that you need to get a bit clearer in your head. This is a complex text with a lot of characters, a lot of characters who have similar sounding names, and a lot of changes throughout so there's no harm in really taking your time to get it firmly in your head. There's also more resources on the BBC Bitesize website, which are really useful for your revision.

Now, back to Macduff. Malcolm gives us a clear idea of who Macduff is and what kind of character he has. At this point, Malcolm has been testing Macduff's loyalty to check he's truthful, and Macduff has absolutely proven himself to Malcolm. You know, he means it too - he isn't going to go quietly. Of course, we know that the witches' prophecies have told Macbeth to fear Macduff. But he's also been told that no one born of woman can harm him. So at this point, I don't think you see how all this is going to end. But, and we might need a drumroll here... Then we find out that Macduff was born by caesarean or as he puts it, was "from his mother's womb untimely ripp'd", which means he is able to stop Macbeth and he does. They meet face to face on the battlefield and Macduff kills Macbeth.

Carl: It's his destiny, isn't it? Being the person who was not born of woman, which means he can fulfil his revenge and restore Malcolm to the throne.

Jean: Part of me does always wonder as well if perhaps hearing the prophecy gives Macduff the confidence to kill Macbeth because he can see a way he fits into it.

Carl: And we've got one more character or set of characters to discuss. Jean, are you ready to meet the witches? "Double double toil and trouble fire burn and cauldron bubble".

Jean: I am so ready.

EXTRACT

First Witch: Round about the cauldron go;

In the poison'd entrails throw.

Toad, that under cold stone

Days and nights has thirty-one

Swelter'd venom sleeping got,

Boil thou first i' the charmed pot.

All Witches: Double, double toil and trouble;

Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.

Jean: And here they are casting a spell and adding their ingredients to their cauldron. Let's also start here by saying that there's clearly more than one of them but the witches can be seen as a single character. They're not like any other characters we meet in the play at all.

Carl: No no no not at all. They're sometimes referred to as the Weird Sisters. Their physical appearance, their style of speech, how they speak in a chant, their actions, and obviously their ability to predict the future all definitely set them apart from all the human characters in the play.

Jean: I mean, they're even meeting around a cauldron here - it is the pinnacle of evil witch stereotypes.

Carl: They're also known as being supernatural characters. They're throwing all sorts into this cauldron, right, poisoned entrails that we've just mentioned, which are internal organs of an animal, right? How do they get that? They're casting a spell which we don't know what it's for. But the way the ingredients are described, it doesn't feel like it's a good cauldron.

Jean: No, supernatural and probably kind of evil as well. There's a real dangerous air to these characters. They are the very first characters on stage and their first line, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair," sets the tone for the whole play that good and bad are going to be confused.

Carl: Indeed, we've discussed this in other episodes, particularly in Episode Two when we looked at Macbeth's character in more detail. We also looked at how everything stems from the witches and how Macbeth is a very different character after he meets the witches compared to how he was before. And also how Macbeth chose to interpret those prophecies.

Jean: It's important to remember that they don't ever directly tell or even suggest to Macbeth that he should murder Duncan. It's just their prophecies that really plant ideas in his mind and take over.

Carl: Yeah, absolutely. Think of it as they plant a seed in Macbeth's mind with their predictions, and then they let his ambition and lust for power do the rest. This is Shakespeare's way of telling us that information is morally neutral until human beings begin to interpret them. At no point do they literally tell Macbeth to murder.

Jean: I do wonder if they know what they're doing though?

Carl: Maybe... Look, the witches are not innocent in this.

Jean: Absolutely, you're right. And that's something we see throughout with how ambiguous many of their predictions are to. Let's have a listen.

EXTRACT

Apparition: Be lion-mettled, proud; and take no care
Who chafes, who frets, or where conspirers are:
Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until
Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill
Shall come against him.

Macbeth: That will never be.

Carl: So what we just heard there is one of the predictions of Macbeth, where the witches tell Macbeth to be "lion-mettled" meaning to have the courage and spirit of a lion, but not to worry about where his enemies or any plots against him because he's fine until the forest moves. This is definitely an ambiguous prediction. It's completely open to interpretation. And that's to Macbeth's judgement.

Jean: Well, we hear Macbeth himself say "that will never be," because when the witches tell him that he doesn't need to fear anything until a forest of trees uproot themselves and move, he feels pretty safe, because that doesn't seem like something that's physically possible.

Carl: Yes. And to give him credit, I'd probably feel pretty safe too if they told me that. There's no chance a forest's just going to move by itself. I'd think I'm all good if some witches told me that.

Jean: But because they tend to see what will happen and not how it will happen, this prediction does come true. In a way that Macbeth hasn't even considered, nor has the audience. The army coming to battle Macbeth all cut off branches from Great Birnam wood. And as they move together, it looks like a forest is moving towards him.

Carl: The fear Macbeth must have felt then, not only is his army moving towards him, but also that not everything is as it seems in these predictions, that he's not as safe as he thought.

Jean: Can you imagine that moment where everything you've believed so far just starts to unravel? And the witches knew what they were doing, they symbolise evil and temptation, but it was up to Macbeth to resist them, which he could have done.

Carl: He could have done, Banquo did it. That would have been a very different story.

Jean: Thanks for listening to Episode Three of the Bitesize English literature podcast all about some of the characters in Macbeth.

Carl: There's still a lot more to discuss. So please join us in the rest of these podcast episodes, available now on BBC Sounds. In Episode Four, we're gonna be diving into some of the key themes in Macbeth and boy howdy, we got some juicy ones for you.