

BBC BITESIZE - MACBETH Episode 7

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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.

Jean: And I'm Jean Menzies. In this series, we're actually heading to my neck of the woods, Scotland, to explore Shakespeare's Macbeth.

Carl: And in this episode, we're taking a closer look at the context of Macbeth, including when it was written and performed.

Jean: So Macbeth was first performed in 1606, which was only three years after King James the Sixth of Scotland also became King James the First of England, after the death of Queen Elizabeth the First. So King James was also Scottish, which might have inspired Shakespeare to set the play in Scotland in order to appeal to the new king.

Carl: And thoughts around the king and royalty play a huge part in Macbeth, which is really relevant to the time in which it was first performed. In 1605, just months before Macbeth was first performed, Guy Fawkes and other conspirators planned to blow up the Houses of Parliament to kill King James the First because they didn't think he should have been given the throne.

Jean: Remember, remember, the fifth of November - aka the Gunpowder Plot as it's now called, was uncovered and stopped. But we can see its influence on Shakespeare. And within this play, there is a strong message and warning in Macbeth about the consequences of regicide, which is another word for killing a king. Because it really was something that carried horrendous consequences. Guy Fawkes did not have a happy ending, as he was executed for his actions. And the stakes were so high because people at the time believed that monarchs were chosen by God. So the punishment was reflective of the importance of this. Remember, remember, the fifth of November?

EXTRACT

Porter: Knock,
knock! Who's there, in the other devil's
name? Faith, here's an equivocator, that could
swear in both the scales against either scale;
who committed treason enough for God's sake,

yet could not equivocate to heaven: O, come
in, equivocator.

Carl: And this line you just heard from the porter shows the direct link to the gunpowder plot of the 1600s. A priest, Father Henry Garnett, was hanged for lying about his knowledge of the gunpowder conspiracy, which he pleaded that he did for God's sake. In his opening speech here, the porter appears after King Duncan had been murdered, and not yet discovered and refers to someone who had committed treason enough for God's sake.

Now, for a modern-day audience, this may not mean too much. But an audience at the time when Macbeth was first performed would realise the reference within these words, and would drive home for the audience the relevance of the play and its key themes and bring everything closer to home.

Jean: And the king does play a really important part in a lot of the context for Macbeth. In the Jacobean era, the years during which James the First reigned, people believed in the divine right of kings, so they believed that the king or queen was chosen by God. So in Macbeth, when Duncan names his son Malcolm as the heir to the throne, but Macbeth then takes the crown after Duncan's death, to the audience at the time that would mean that Macbeth had taken what God had intended for Malcolm.

Carl: Basically, that would have been taken as Macbeth having gone against God, and any punishment or consequence would have been completely justified.

Jean: Exactly. It also makes regicide a sin as well as a crime, which reflects the conversations we've had in earlier episodes including Episode Two, if you want to go back and relisten - about Macbeth's hallucinations and whether they are caused by guilt or if they're a consequence given to him due to sin.

EXTRACT

All Witches: Double, double toil and trouble;
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.

Third Witch: Scale of dragon, tooth of wolf,
Witches' mummy, maw and gulf
Of the ravin'd salt-sea shark,
Root of hemlock digg'd i' the dark,
Liver of blaspheming Jew,
Gall of goat, and slips of yew
Sliver'd in the moon's eclipse,
Nose of Turk and Tartar's lips,
Finger of birth-strangled babe
Ditch-deliver'd by a drab,
Make the gruel thick and slab:
Add thereto a tiger's chaudron,
For the ingredients of our cauldron.

All Witches: Double, double toil and trouble;
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.

Second Witch: Cool it with a baboon's blood,

Then the charm is firm and good.

Carl: People at that time really believed in witchcraft. King James the First himself had published a book on the subject called Demonology. So we know that when Shakespeare came to write this play, he was writing it for an audience that he knew would find the witch characters very interesting.

Jean: They'd be interested and they'd also feel immediately unsettled by them. They were feared in the Jacobean era and hundreds of innocent people, predominantly women, were arrested, questioned and often tortured to get confession. Witches were usually sentenced to hanging because they were believed to be possessed by demons, and associated with the devil. In what we've just heard, the witches are throwing so many gruesome things into their cauldron from a wolf's tooth to a baby's finger. It's really emphasising to the audience how evil and twisted these characters are supposed to be.

Carl: The witches' prophecies lead to Macbeth committing regicide, and ruling Scotland without any divine right. This would completely link with a Jacobean view that witches work against God, and are pure evil.

Jean: So the audience must have absolutely rejoiced at the end of the play when Malcolm was crowned king then. They'd feel that God's will is restored, and everything is as it should be. So there's another piece of social and historical context I'd like to take a look at though. And that's the perception and the role of women in this era.

Carl: Good roles for witches. Good roles for Lady Macbeth...

Jean: All very negative though right?

Carl: I suppose you could get a decent role as Macduff's wife, but she doesn't have a good ending does she?

Jean: No no, the one like sort of virtuous women is murdered.

Carl: It's almost like it's a tragedy.

EXTRACT

Lady Macbeth: What beast was't, then,
That made you break this enterprise to me?
When you durst do it, then you were a man;
And, to be more than what you were, you would
Be so much more the man.

Jean: So we did already discuss Lady Macbeth's character in more detail in Episode Two. But there's also some really interesting points to be made around the context of women, when this play takes place, because they had far less rights. Wives were usually not much more than property of men, and

they were pretty much there to look after the men and have their babies, especially in those upper aristocratic classes.

Carl: Women definitely weren't given the rights they should have been. Lady Macbeth doesn't seem to fit this stereotypical mould of the time, which is really interesting. She has a lot of ambition over him, and she isn't afraid to show it. And as we just heard there, she does have a lot of control over Macbeth and his decisions in a way that we wouldn't expect for this time. He actually describes her as his "dearest partner of greatness".

Jean: She even references it herself in Act 1, scene 5. She knows Macbeth is a little shaky in his resolve to murder. And she calls on spirits saying "unsex me here". She wants the qualities associated with being a man at the time and wants to be rid of the weaknesses associated with being a woman then. However, the only way she can get that power is through her husband.

Carl: And she follows up that line by saying, "fill me from the crown to the toe top-full of direst cruelty". She wants to escape the limits of stereotypical femininity, which wouldn't have allowed her to be strong or cruel or so ready and able to kill. So that's why she needs unsexing and filling from top to toe with cruelty. It's quite an ask.

Jean: Yeah, well, it's worth remembering that in the original performance of this play, the part of Lady Macbeth would actually have been played by a man. Although let's not even start on the topic of women not being able to act on the English stage until 1660. Because I think I need a whole other podcast series for that. Being the case of Lady Macbeth being played by a man would have actually probably helped emphasise the character's masculine qualities, which could have been a consideration for Shakespeare.

Carl: I just also thought of something we should mention when we talk about this play. The fact that we've been calling it by its name, rather than what we should have been doing, because there's a curse around Macbeth. Is there not?

Jean: Oh, my God, yes, there is a curse. And I'm really concerned what's going to happen after we leave the studio.

Carl: Yes, the curse, right. It's a fairly common belief today that the play of Macbeth is cursed. Apparently, the origin of that is that a coven of witches cursed the play because Shakespeare had used real spells and incantations in it. And then a lot of accidents and issues with the first performance in 1606. And there have been stories ever since with problems that people blame on the curse. So, like we said before, in order to break or avoid the curse, you must not say the play's name. And once you leave the theatre, you have to spin three times, and then curse, and then knock on the theatre door to enter to go back in again. I did not do any of those rules the first time I saw Macbeth. So...

Jean: I was about to ask, is it only because you perform in it that you have to do these things? Or when we leave this room this evening should we do this?

[Hear a knock]

Carl: Just checking.

Jean: It does feel particularly fitting, right? Given how much of this play is based in the supernatural. Although it's not necessary to bring up the curse in your exam, because I don't think that's the kind of information about the supernatural and Macbeth the examiners are looking for. It's fun to learn about though. So thanks so much for listening to Episode Seven of the Bitesize English literature podcast all about the context of Macbeth.

Carl: You can test what you've learned about Macbeth from this and all the other episodes in the Bitesize English literature podcast by adding to the final episode of this podcast for a recap quiz.

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