



Background and historical context

William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 in the town of Stratford-upon-Avon. Not much is known about his early life, but he is believed to have attended grammar school and received a good education. He later moved to London, where he began his career as an actor and playwright.

William Shakespeare is widely considered to be one of the greatest playwrights in the history of the English language. His life spanned the reigns of Queen Elizabeth I and King James I. During this time, England was relatively peaceful and prosperous, allowing arts and culture to flourish in what has been called a 'Golden Age'. Shakespeare was at the forefront of this movement that saw the theatre become a popular form of entertainment, particularly in London where up to 15,000 people a week in 1595 went to see a play.

Shakespeare's plays covered a wide range of themes, such as love, jealousy, betrayal, power and the human condition. He wrote plays in many different genres, including comedies, histories and tragedies. His plays were known for their complex characters, poetic language and powerful themes. Some of his most famous plays include 'Macbeth', 'Hamlet', 'Romeo and Juliet' and 'Othello'. He also wrote a collection of 154 sonnets.

'Macbeth' – the play

Background and themes

'Macbeth' is a play written by William Shakespeare. It was first performed in 1606 at Hampton Court for King James I. The play takes place in Scotland and follows Macbeth, an ambitious soldier who encounters three witches who tell him that he will be king. Armed with this knowledge, Macbeth chooses to assassinate King Duncan in order to achieve his goal. The rest of the play explores the consequences of Macbeth's actions, not only on himself, but on Scotland as a whole. The play's themes include conflict, order, ambition and the supernatural. Through the characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, the

play explores the moral and social consequences of unchecked ambition.

The themes in 'Macbeth' have timeless relevance, but the play is also rooted in the historical and cultural context of Shakespeare's England. The plot reflects the tensions and power struggles surrounding the death of Elizabeth I without a male heir, and the subsequent accession of James I to the English throne. The importance of a strong monarch with a rightful claim to the throne is reflected in 'Macbeth' as is the monarch's ability to maintain social order and avoid civil unrest. Shakespeare's play explores the consequences of people in power whose ambition goes unchecked and this theme of ambition is often linked with tragedy. However, while Shakespeare's 'Macbeth' is shaped by the historical and cultural context in which it was written, the themes of ambition and conflict are universal – ensuring the play's lasting popularity and enduring influence.

Setting

'Macbeth' is set in Scotland in the 11th century. The play is loosely based on events concerning the real Macbeth who was king of Scotland for 17 years from 1040–57. Shakespeare read about Macbeth in a history book called *The Chronicles of England and Ireland* by Raphael Holinshed, using stories from the book and adding ideas of his own. He perhaps changed some details to avoid upsetting King James I as Banquo had actually played a part in the assassination of King Duncan, but King James I was a direct descendant of Banquo and would not want to be faced with his ancestor's part in murdering a king, especially since King James I believed in the Divine Right of Kings (see p.8).

Language

'Macbeth' is written in an Early Modern English dialect used in England during the late 16th and early 17th centuries. The play is largely written in verse, specifically in iambic pentameter – a metre consisting of ten syllables per line with a rhythmic pattern of unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. This gives the dialogue a musical quality, fitting its themes of intense ambition and tragedy. The play also often uses rhyme

to reinforce the poem-like quality of the verse, often in couplets (two consecutive lines with matching rhyme).

Prose is also used in the play. Prose is a form of language that has no formal metrical structure and is used to express ordinary language in a straightforward and clear manner. In the play, the porter uses prose when he is telling crude jokes. Prose is also often used to and by the lower-status characters, such as servants and the murderers. This contrasts with the poetic language mostly used by the main characters and nobles when talking among themselves. This helps to create a social hierarchy within the play and further emphasises the play's themes of order and conflict.

The theatre in Shakespeare's time

Theatre was a popular form of entertainment during Shakespeare's time, appealing to audience members from all walks of life, despite some people considering it to be a form of vice.

Shakespeare's plays were first performed at theatres in London, such as The Curtain and The Globe. These theatres were built with specific features to enhance the audience's experience and to showcase the talent of the actors and playwrights of the time. They were typically open-air structures, with a large circular or polygonal stage surrounded by tiered seating for the audience. The stage was raised several feet off the ground to allow for more visibility and had a roof to protect the actors from the elements.

The theatres had a large yard in front of the stage, called the pit, where the 'groundlings' who paid the least for their tickets stood to watch the performance. This area would have been noisy and bustling, hence the need for comic interlude even within tragedies, in order to maintain a busy crowd's interest. The upper levels of seating were reserved for the more affluent members of the audience, who could afford the better seats. These areas were typically covered and had more comfortable seating.

The stage was also equipped with a trapdoor for actors to make dramatic entrances and exits, as well as for special effects such as ghosts rising from below. The back of the stage was often painted with elaborate murals and had wings on either side for actors to hide behind during scene changes.

Lighting in the theatres was provided by natural light, so performances started early in the afternoon and ended before dusk. Musicians played musical instruments, such as lutes and harps, as accompaniment for songs and dances in the plays.

The Globe Theatre, built in 1599, was the most famous and most significant theatre of the time and was where most of Shakespeare's plays were performed. It was owned by a company of actors, including Shakespeare himself. It was a large, open-air, circular building that could hold up to 3,000 people.

Shakespeare's plays were performed by a company of actors known as Lord Chamberlain's Men, later the King's Men after James I became king in 1603. The company was made up of a core group of actors who played the lead roles in the plays. Many of the actors in the company were also shareholders in the company. This meant that they had a financial stake in the success of the plays and therefore had a vested interest in ensuring their quality. Women were not allowed to act on stage, so all female roles were played by male actors.

Life in Jacobean times

Society

Jacobean society was highly hierarchical, with a clear distinction between the social classes. The nobility, consisting of the aristocracy and wealthy landowners, held the highest status, while the lower classes, including the working poor and vagrants, were at the bottom of the social ladder. Women were also restricted in their social and economic status, with very limited opportunities for education, employment and independence.

Family life

Family life in Jacobean England was male-dominated (patriarchal) and the head of the household had significant control over its members. The family was one of the most important elements in society and was expected to maintain order, stability and continuity. Marriage was seen as a means of securing social and economic advantage, and arranged marriages were common, especially among the wealthy. Families

were patriarchal, meaning the men were in positions of power. Women were expected to be subservient and in roles where they were responsible for the home, while fathers held the ultimate authority in the family and were responsible for the behaviour and upbringing of their children (although children were mostly brought up by women). Male children were seen as especially important for succession and inheritance. The first-born son would receive the family title, lands, money and status. The themes of family, power and succession play a significant role in 'Macbeth', reflecting the realities of Jacobean family life.

King James I and the Divine Right of Kings

King James I believed strongly in the Divine Right of Kings, a belief system that saw the monarch as God's representative on Earth and that he had been given divine sanction to rule. James I saw himself as the ultimate authority, though he often clashed with parliament on this, as he went against their advice and wishes, raising taxes and making unpopular political decisions. The Divine Right of Kings came to the defence of monarchical absolutism, bolstering James I's assertion that he could not be held accountable for his actions by any earthly authority. Shakespeare's play explores this idea: King Duncan and his son, Malcolm, and in turn Banquo's descendants, are all rightful kings, put on the throne of Scotland by God. This would have pleased James I greatly; he was a direct descendant of Banquo's and the play can be seen to legitimise his status as King of England too. As one of the King's Men, Shakespeare would have added this element to foster good relations with his patron.

The plague

The bubonic plague was a major public health crisis in Jacobean England, with outbreaks occurring during the 16th and 17th centuries. The disease was spread through the bites of fleas infected with the plague bacteria. These fleas were carried by rats. The plague caused widespread death and suffering, with mortality rates ranging from 30 to 60 per cent in affected communities. The outbreaks of the plague had far-reaching consequences for society, including economic disruption, population loss and changes in social and cultural attitudes.

The fear of the plague and its association with death and mortality would have added to the sense of urgency and tragedy in 'Macbeth'. Macbeth's enemies have 'blisters' on their tongues when they speak his name; Scotland itself needs to be 'purged' of sickness. Shakespeare's use of illness, disease, death and mortality are closely tied to the reality of life in Jacobean England, where the threat of death from the plague was a constant presence.

The supernatural

In Shakespeare's time, there was widespread belief in the supernatural world. James I wholeheartedly believed in the existence of witches and even wrote a book on witchcraft called *Daemonologie*, which set about proving the existence of witches and explained what sorts of punishments they should undergo. The book also explored the links between witches, demons and those who made pacts with them. James I passed laws condemning anyone found guilty of witchcraft to death. He called witchcraft 'high treason against God'. King James I's fear of witches triggered the deaths of thousands of innocent people at the time as his laws stirred up suspicion and paranoia through England and Europe. The punishment for witchcraft can be seen in 'Macbeth' through the titular character Macbeth and his wife Lady Macbeth.

Tragedy

Shakespeare's 'Macbeth' is a tragedy. The earliest form of this type of play can be traced to the 5th century BCE and five hundred years later, the Roman playwright Seneca, one of Shakespeare's key influences, added much more violence and vivid imagery to the genre. Shakespearean tragedy takes the main elements of earlier tragedies and follows a similar set of expectations. The tragic hero should have exceptional qualities that lead to praise and success at the beginning of the play but they should have a character trait that becomes their central flaw – their hubris – usually excessive pride or arrogance. This flaw causes conflict with the fate or gods leading to the eventual downfall of the hero. The audience is reminded of the hero's goodness at the beginning of the tragedy, creating

mixed emotions of pity and terror with the end bringing about a catharsis or resolution of the audience's emotions. Tragedy enables the audience to experience intense human emotions and re-evaluate what is meaningful to them. 'Macbeth' falls into the tragedy genre as Macbeth can be seen as a tragic hero with exceptional qualities, such as bravery, but having a fatal flaw in the form of his ambition, which ultimately leads to his downfall.

Characters

MACBETH, Thane of Glamis, later Thane of Cawdor and King of Scotland

LADY MACBETH, his wife

DUNCAN, King of Scotland

MALCOLM, his older son

DONALBAIN, his younger son

BANQUO, a Thane

FLEANCE, Banquo's son

MACDUFF, Thane of Fife

LADY MACDUFF, his wife

SON of Macduff

ROSS, a Thane

LENNOX, a Thane

MENTEITH, a Thane

ANGUS, a Thane

CAITHNESS, a Thane

GENTLEWOMAN, Lady Macbeth's attendant

SEYTON, Macbeth's armour bearer

PORTER at Macbeth's castle

CAPTAIN

OLD MAN

SCOTTISH DOCTOR

ENGLISH DOCTOR

Three MURDERERS

Three WITCHES

HECATE

Three other WITCHES

Three APPARITIONS

SIWARD, Earl of Northumberland

YOUNG SIWARD, his son

Lords, soldiers, attendants, servants and messengers



Act I Scene 1

Thunder and lightning

Enter three WITCHES

1ST WITCH

When shall we three meet again
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

2ND WITCH

When the hurlyburly's done,
When the battle's lost and won.

3RD WITCH

That will be ere the set of sun.

5

1ST WITCH

Where the place?

2ND WITCH

Upon the heath.

3RD WITCH

There to meet with Macbeth.

1ST WITCH

I come Greymalkin!

2ND WITCH

Paddock calls.

3RD WITCH

Anon!

ALL

Fair is foul, and foul is fair;
Hover through the fog and filthy air.

10

Exeunt



Act I Scene 2

Alarum within

Enter DUNCAN, MALCOLM, DONALBAIN, LENNOX, with attendants, meeting a bleeding CAPTAIN

DUNCAN

What bloody man is that? He can report,
As seemeth by his plight, of the revolt

Three witches meet upon a blasted heath where they wait for Macbeth.

- SD** **Thunder and lightning:** *This first sound creates an ominous atmosphere. When the play was written, storms were believed to be an omen of evil or trouble.*
- 3** **hurlyburly:** noise and chaos of the battle
- 5** **ere:** before
- 8** **Greymalkin:** *The witches hear their familiars call out to them and they answer. A witch's familiar is an animal spirit guide that helps them with their magic. Greymalkin is a grey cat.*
- 9** **Paddock:** A toad (another familiar)
Anon!: Soon!
- 10** **Fair ... fair:** What is good can appear bad or evil. What is bad/evil can appear as something good.
- 11** **Hover:** *This refers to how the witches can move, by floating through the air.*
fog ... air: *The misty and dirty atmosphere. Shakespeare was reliant on his language to create the atmosphere of the play in the imaginations of his audience. These words create a murky and threatening atmosphere at the end of the scene.*

Duncan, King of Scotland, meets a wounded captain.

- SD** **Alarum:** Call to arms
- 2** **plight:** condition
revolt: rebellion

The injured captain reports how Macbeth won the battle, defeating the rebellion led by Macdonald. Soon after that battle, an invading Norwegian army began to attack the tired Scottish army.

- 3** **sergeant:** the wounded captain
- 6** **broil:** battle
- 8** **spent:** exhausted
- 9** **choke their art:** drown themselves by clinging to each other
- 11** **villainies:** evil traits
- 12** **Western Isles:** Hebrides
- 13** **kerns and gallowglasses:** *These are types of soldiers. Kerns were foot soldiers from Ireland and gallowglasses were soldiers who fought with axes.*
- 14** **fortune:** *In this instance fortune means fate and is personified as someone who can control the outcome of events. For more about **personification** see Glossary p.258.*
- 15** **whore:** *A negative term for a woman who is a mistress or a lover.*
all: everything
- 17** **brandished steel:** drawn sword
- 18** **smoked with bloody execution:** *This creates an image of Macbeth's sword in battle, steaming with the blood of the enemy.*
- 19** **valour's minion:** *Valour means bravery or courage. A minion used to mean a favourite of someone powerful i.e. the king.*
- 20** **slave:** *This is an insult directed at Macdonald.*
- 21** **Which:** who (Macbeth)
- 22** **unseamed ... chops:** sliced him open from the stomach to the jaws
- 24** **cousin:** *King Duncan and Macbeth are cousins having the same grandfather.*
- 25** **reflection:** shining
- 27–8** **So ... swells:** *Here the **metaphor** (see Glossary p.258) of a spring is used to describe how at the moment they thought they had won the battle, more threats arose.*
- 29** **justice:** *A reference to their army – they have right on their side.*
- 30** **skipping:** quick-footed
- 31** **Norwegian lord:** Sweno, King of Norway
surveying vantage: seeing his opportunity
- 32** **furbished:** newly polished and prepared for battle

DUNCAN Dismayed not this
Our captains, Macbeth and Banquo?

CAPTAIN Yes,
As sparrows eagles, or the hare the lion. **35**
If I say sooth, I must report they were
As cannons overcharged with double cracks,
So they doubly redoubled strokes upon the foe.
Except they meant to bathe in reeking wounds,
Or memorise another Golgotha, **40**
I cannot tell –
But I am faint, my gashes cry for help.

DUNCAN So well thy words become thee, as thy wounds,
They smack of honour both. Go get him surgeons.
Exit CAPTAIN, attended
Enter ROSS and ANGUS
Who comes here?

MALCOLM The worthy Thane of Ross. **45**

LENNOX What a haste looks through his eyes! So should
he look
That seems to speak things strange.

ROSS God save the King!

DUNCAN Whence cam'st thou, worthy Thane?

ROSS From Fife, great King,
Where the Norwegian banners flout the sky,
And fan our people cold. **50**
Norway himself, with terrible numbers,
Assisted by that most disloyal traitor,
The Thane of Cawdor, began a dismal conflict,
Till that Bellona's bridegroom, lapped in proof,
Confronted him with self-comparisons, **55**
Point against point, rebellious arm 'gainst arm,
Curbing his lavish spirit; and, to conclude,

The captain continues his report of Banquo and Macbeth's bravery in fighting the Norwegians. The captain then collapses and is taken for treatment. Ross completes the report of the battle.

33–4 Dismayed ... Banquo?: Did this not dismay Macbeth and Banquo?

35 As sparrows ... lion: In the same way that a sparrow might dismay an eagle or a hare dismay a lion. *This is ironic as we know that these creatures would not be dismayed by creatures who are less powerful.*

THEME: Order

Animal imagery is used to show how Macbeth is a strong, powerful and fearless predator. He is at the peak of his success and takes his rightful place in the great order of things.

36 If I say sooth: To tell the truth

37 cracks: *The sound gunpowder makes.*

39 Except: Unless

reeking: steaming

40 memorise: to make us remember

Golgotha: 'the place of the skull' *The place where Jesus Christ was crucified.*

44 smack of: suggest

45 Thane: *A Scottish title, roughly equivalent to an earl.*

47 seems to: is about to

49 flout: mock

50 fan our people cold: make them go cold with fear

53 dismal: disastrous

54 Bellona's bridegroom: *Mars, the Roman god of war, was husband to Bellona.*

lapped in proof: wearing armour

55 Confronted ... self-comparisons: fought him with just as much skill and strength

57 Curbing: restraining or holding back

lavish: *A term that used to mean arrogant or insolent.*