
UNIT 4 *MACBETH: CRITICAL RESPONSES*

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* is one of the most critically acclaimed tragedies. It has a rich critical oeuvre. Critics have responded in varied ways to the play. There are Feminist, Marxist, New Historicist approaches amongst many others to the play. This unit will outline some of these approaches to provide an overview of the way in which the play has been read and interpreted over the years.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, you will be reading the wide ranging interest that Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* evoked over the centuries following the play. In a true sense, the play was at the centre of critical comment and analysis. The process began in the early eighteenth century and from then on has continued uninterrupted. Initially, it appealed as a play that showed the ethos of Elizabethan-Jacobean period. Later, it was a subject of psychological probing. Still, later, the play assumed the form of political conflicts and assessments of nationalist as well as crime-related developments across the ideological spectrum. The cultural-ideological concerns gained depth of vision as well as sustained engagement with the good fighting evil in the human imagination.

4.2 EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURY CRITICISM: A BRIEF NOTE

4.2.1 Samuel Johnson: “Preface to Shakespeare” (1765)

The eighteenth century critic Samuel Johnson, edited the bard’s plays and in the Preface, calls him a man who holds a “faithfull mirror to manners and life.” In tune with critical thought of his time, Johnson appreciates Shakespeare’s plays for their observation of the society in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Johnson calls *Macbeth* a “tragedy dependent upon “enchantment” to “produce the chief events by the assistance of supernatural agents.” This would have been seen as an act of transgression in its time. However, Johnson proposes that Shakespeare was in no danger as the “reality” of witchcraft and enchantment has been “credited by the common people” (Miola, Robert S. Ed. *William Shakespeare: Macbeth*. New York and London, 2014. 227-228). According to the critic, the trial of the witches at Warbois during Elizabeth’s reign was an example to corroborate this idea. Johnson draws attention to King James’s concerns about witchcraft as presented in *Daemonologie* (1597). This book was

reprinted at London when James assumed the English throne. Subsequently the Act against Witchcraft was revised in 1604. As a result, the world of witches and the supernatural was a believable one—"it became not only unpolite but criminal to doubt it" (229). Against this background, according to Johnson, Shakespeare would not have been censured. He has only followed "such histories as were then thought true; nor can it be doubted that the scenes of enchantment, however they may now be ridiculed, were both by himself and his audience thought awful and affecting" (229). Graymalkin parallels the witches' use of the cat. The 'familiar' were known to destroy the neighbour's cattle, and "killing swine" also produced melancholy fits and loss of flesh. All these ideas prevalent at the time are used by Shakespeare in *Macbeth*.

In discussing the character of Lady Macbeth, Johnson praises Shakespeare for his understanding of human nature. She persuades her husband to commit the murder by urging "excellence and dignity of courage, a glittering idea which has dazzled mankind from age to age" (229). Macbeth's famous lines on the death of the queen, "She should have died hereafter./ There would have been time for—such a world!—/ Tomorrow,..." has evoked critical response. Johnson considers them to be an example of the understanding of human nature that "tomorrow will be happier than today, but tomorrow and tomorrow steals over us unenjoyed and unregarded." In short Johnson's appreciation of Shakespeare's plays rested on their presentation of observed reality of the time in a manner that was real, objective and humane.

4.2.2 S.T. Coleridge: "On *Macbeth*" (1819)

A thinker, philosopher of the Romantic tradition, S.T. Coleridge, praised Shakespeare for his use of imagination. In his essay "On *Macbeth*", the nineteenth century critic, Coleridge posits *Macbeth* in contrast to *Hamlet* especially in terms of the opening of the play. In *Hamlet*, there is a transition from "the simplest forms of conversation to the language of impassioned intellect—yet the intellect still remaining the seat of passion." In the case of *Macbeth*, the appeal is to the imagination and the emotions therewith" (Miola 233). In short for Coleridge, *Macbeth* appeals to the passion via imagination whereas *Hamlet* appeals to the intellect. Coleridge's comments have particularly been cited for his comments on the Porter scene. He says:

Hence the movement throughout is the most rapid of all Shakespeare's plays; and hence also, with the exception of the disgusting passage of the Porter (2.3), which I dare pledge myself to demonstrate to be an interpolation of the actors, there is not, to the best of my remembrance, a single pun or play on words in the whole drama. (233)

Coleridge defends Shakespeare on the charge of "punning" and sees in *Macbeth* the absence of puns. He also notes an "absence of comedy, nay, even of irony and philosophic contemplation in *Macbeth*—the play being wholly and purely tragic" (233). The important points made by Coleridge pertain to *Macbeth*'s appeal to the imagination and the absence of pun restoring it completely within the ambit of pure tragedy. Morality is not "equivocal" and the play focuses on "rage" caused by "disruption of anxious thought and the quick transition of fear into it" (233).

Coleridge attributes the creation of the witches entirely to Shakespeare as part of his collection of Ariel and Caliban. Differing from Johnson he argues,

They are wholly different from any representation of witches in the contemporary writers and yet presented a sufficient external resemblance to the creatures of vulgar prejudice to act immediately on the audience. Their characters consist in the imaginative disconnected from the good; they are shadowy, obscure and fearfully anomalous of physical nature, the lawless of human nature, elemental avengers without sex or kin. (234)

It is clear that for the critic, *Macbeth* remains a product of the imagination. The witches are markedly different from contemporary portrayal despite any "external resemblance." He understands them as "imaginative disconnected from the good;" they are anarchic and out of the structure of morality. In this way they determine what Coleridge calls the "character" of the drama. As for Lady Macbeth, Coleridge

sees her as “deluded by ambition” and bringing shame on her husband. Her invocation of the spirits is another example, for Coleridge, of the imagination familiarised to “dreadful conceptions.” Note that the critic had in the famous *Biographia Literaria* written about the role of imagination and made a distinction between the primary and secondary forms of imagination. It was a faculty particularly important for thinkers of this period. Coleridge’s understanding of Shakespeare’s plays is mediated through the role of imagination in creative thinking.

4.2.3 Thomas de Quincey: “On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*” (1823)

Another nineteenth century critic, de Quincey, focuses on Act II, Scene III. The gruesome murders have already been done and the moment is followed by Macduff and Lennox knocking at the gate, followed by the Porter scene. His comments have been understood to mean a defence of the Porter scene in the play. Unlike Coleridge’s stress on imagination, de Quincey interprets in *Macbeth* “strife of mind” and one that is greater than that in his wife. But the “murderous mind of necessity is finally to be presumed in both.” This was a neat contrast to Duncan’s “gracious” nature. It also explained, in *Macbeth* the transition from “human nature” to “fiendish nature”. Lady Macbeth is “unsexed” and Macbeth seems devil like. The normalcy of human nature has as if gone into a “syncope” for a new order to set in. He explains the knocking thus:

Hence it is, that, when the deed is done, when the work of darkness is perfect, then the world of darkness passes away like a pageantry in the clouds: the knocking at the gate is heard; and it makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced: the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish; the pulses of life are beginning to beat again; and the re-establishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live, first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them. (238)

4.3 A.C. BRADLEY: *SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY* (1904)

Shakespearean Tragedy is a series of lectures delivered by A.C. Bradley on Shakespeare’s tragedies. In it, the critic interprets the play in the context of the text. Even as references to certain other texts of the time might be there, Bradley analyses the cause of tragedy and the fall of the tragic hero. In the case of *Macbeth*, he takes on from the point made by Coleridge. Whereas the nineteenth century critic had compared the play to *Hamlet* and cite difference, Bradley compares the two plays in terms of their likeness. He cites the fact that a Shakespearean tragedy “has a special tone or atmosphere of its own, quite perceptible, however difficult to describe” (278). *Macbeth* is marked by “darkness” or “blackness”. He then cites many instances in the play that contribute to this idea.

According to Bradley, even though “the influence of the Witches’ prophecies on *Macbeth* is very great, it is quite clearly shown to be an influence and nothing more. There is no sign whatever in the play that Shakespeare meant the actions of *Macbeth* to be forced on him by an external power, whether that of the Witches, or of their ‘masters’, or of Hecate” (287). For the critic, *Macbeth*’s tragedy lies within himself and not on some outside agency. His criticism of the play rests on an understanding of words in the play that carry it to its tragic outcome. Bradley presents a long commentary on the thought processes in *Macbeth*’s mind and the way in which he would have been influenced by his own desire as also later the enormity of his act. As he says, “...the consciousness of guilt is stronger in him than the consciousness of failure” (301). Bradley points out how we continue to sympathise with *Macbeth* even at the end of the play and see in him something “sublime.”

With regard to Lady *Macbeth*, he says that she is “the most commanding and perhaps the most awe-inspiring figure that Shakespeare drew” (307). Mark that Bradley’s analysis of her rests entirely on the way she is drawn in the play. He says of her, “She helps him, but never asks his help. She leans on nothing but herself” (309). She is marked by “courage and force of will”. These lines show how at the turn of the century, the response to Shakespeare’s plays changed. His plays were understood only in terms of conventional ideas of plot and character. Moreover, all this was filtered through Bradley’s

understanding of character and the sequence of events. Later criticism begins to incorporate texts of the time to assess how the characters were 'fashioned' in specific ways.

4.4 THE MARXIST APPROACH TO *MACBETH*

A movement that arose in the mid-nineteenth century with the ideas of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Marxism was developed in many different ways in the twentieth century. It made a great contribution to literature and literary studies as it drove home the consciousness of class antagonism and social positioning of the marginal social groups. In the modern period these ideas manifested themselves through other movements that kept culture in the forefront. Through it, critics approached the social context of socio-economic groups relegated to the periphery of society. It is important to look at some seminal thinkers who have looked at Shakespeare's *Macbeth* from a Marxist perspective. In the article "Macbeth", Victor Kiernan explores the historical context and the plausibility of Shakespeare's familiarity with the same. The critic interprets Macbeth's character as one that brings in 'change'. This belongs not to Macbeth as an individual, but it is a 'change' that belongs to its time. There are social forces in a state of collision and this is of interest in the play. He places Macbeth as the "second of two usurpers of a throne in the tragedies", the first being Claudius in *Hamlet*. Kiernan sees the time of the play as close to the succession of James I and one that is surrounded by uncertainty due to rebellion; the Gunpowder Plot being a case in point. The critic also points towards Shakespeare's understanding of Scotland as one that needed a purging of sorts as it had "an undefined malady in the body politic".

Macbeth's "reign of terror" is contrasted with Duncan's virtue as "most sainted king" or that of Edward who is seen as the healer, who has "heavenly gift of prophecy". According to Kiernan, Malcolm is introduced "as a young prince of a new strain". So Malcolm is supposed to cleanse Scotland off its evils. Kiernan rightly explains how this raises the issue of people's right to throw off a ruler like Macbeth. He states:

He is a usurper, but the argument would seem to hold good even against the most legitimate monarch; the dividing-line is at any rate faint. Shakespeare is not free to follow it to its logical conclusion; but he is ineffectually challenging James's doctrine that the worst conceivable ruler, once anointed and sceptered, must be submitted to uncomplainingly. (Kiernan, Victor. *Eight Tragedies of Shakespeare: A Marxist Study*. London & New York: Verso, 1996. 128-129)

Kiernan places the Macbeth-Lady Macbeth partnership in the context of the murders. On the one hand the critic looks at how Macbeth has to prove himself to her, on the other how he later becomes assertive in planning and executing. Macbeth faints in the banquet scene even as Lady Macbeth retains her composure. In this context the critic sees the family, "the microcosm of the society" as being torn apart. Kiernan does not pay too much attention to the witches. He sees them as prompting Macbeth further in his enterprise. But his primary interest remains seeing the play in its context and the equation between Scotland and England. As he finally explains:

Macbeth makes an apt symbol of times when men feel mysterious forces at work, at bottom social forces not yet clearly recognised for what they are, which turn individuals almost irresistibly against their fellows. He felt it somehow dishonourable to shrink from a challenge to reach the summit, whatever the hazards. In Lukacs' words, the play is an illustration of how great historical collisions could be translated into human terms and imbued with dramatic life (*Historical Novel* 137). In a time like Shakespeare's a society may be ripe for change, but only individuals ruthlessly prepared to defy old rules of conduct can lead the way towards a shattering of the old order, and an opening towards a new one...It led him to a nihilistic rejection of life, as a cosmic failure, without meaning...Feudalism was giving way to capitalism, even if neither of these terms had yet been invented. (138)

Kiernan's point of view analyses the triggers in Macbeth's decision making from believing in the witches, Lady Macbeth and most of all to his own inner impulses. He locates the Scotland-England conflict and

Macbeth's own developments in this context. This understanding of the changes fermenting in the social structure places Macbeth within a social context. His disregard for the old order helps us understand Macbeth not as an individual but as a symbol of change as brought out by the individual as force.

Marxist critic, Anand Prakash in an essay written especially for an edition on *Macbeth* titles his essay, "Reaffirming Humanity Against Odds: A View of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*." The present-day critic explains the play in the context of the struggle for humanism, an idea he thinks, is central to the world of Shakespeare's plays. He is quick to point out how the play is about "larger processes than individual initiatives". It is not any one factor but "a whole train of tendencies rooted in the existing political climate" that work to control the "main players". This line of argument places the play against the context of its age. For instance, the witches are seen as "figures situated at the periphery." The people who are at the centre of things have pushed them to the margins. According to Prakash, the play is then a "head-on collision of the two discourses, one that determines the operation of high politics and the other of the deprived" (178). Macbeth is therefore placed at the centre of these conflicts. Shakespeare may have referred to a 'source' for the character of Macbeth, but the play belongs to the England of its time—"the substance of modernity in Tudor England" (180).

4.5 CULTURAL MATERIALISM

Most criticism of the early twentieth century toed the line of Bradley and the New Critical theory by focussing on the text as a closed unit. The Marxist understanding of Shakespeare's plays in terms of class and later culture led to new ways of interpreting the plays. Feminist criticism, new historicist and cultural materialist reading brought in a whole range of issues that led to the discussion of Shakespeare's plays in a way that was vital and dynamic. New Historicists and cultural materialists have understood the play against the socio-cultural and historical milieu of the period in which the play was produced and read. Placing *Macbeth* in the context of the social histories of the time helps understand the different ways of interpreting the manifold aspects of the play. The cultural materialist position helps us read into the construction of people located on the margins of the society. The women, commoners and people belonging to the lower orders can be understood just as well as the world of kings and queens. One of the important aspects in *Macbeth* is that of the monarch and his claim to the throne. The play is set in Jacobean England i.e. the time period when King James VI of Scotland has taken over as the monarch of England as King James I of England. In the process the English and Scottish thrones were united.

This was not an easy transition given the fact that there was no direct heir to Queen Elizabeth. The vacuum left by the Queen led to rival claims. Even as the ascension of King James was seen as viable, it was not without its opponents. In this context it helps to look at some interesting documents from that period that foreground this debate.

In his article "*Macbeth: History, Ideology and Intellectuals*" (1992), Alan Sinfield uses a cultural materialist approach to discuss the disturbances in the play that create conflict in a Jamesian reading of the play. Sinfield uses George Buchanan's *De jure regni* (1579) and *History of Scotland* (1582) in his argument.

He looks at the sixteenth century England as a development from "feudalism to the absolutist state". He explains how in the case of the former, the king's power was "often little more than nominal". According to him, "authority was distributed also among overlapping non-national institutions such as the church, estates, assemblies, regions, and towns. In the absolutist state, power became centralized in the figure of the monarch, the exclusive source of legitimacy" (219). This indicates how the monarch tried to amass power and assert her/himself. An absolutist assertion, partial or total also meant that there would be "dissidents". For Sinfield, this was a broad category that comprised, "aristocrats like the Earls of Northumberland and Westmorland who led the northern rising of 1569, and the Duke of Norfolk, who plotted to replace Elizabeth with Mary Queen of Scots in 1571; clergy who refused the state religion; gentry who supported them and who tried to raise awkward matters in Parliament; writers and printers

who published criticism of state policy; the populace when it complained about food, prices, enclosures, or anything” (Nagpal 219).

The rebellions in the sixteenth century draw our attention to the dissatisfaction as well as the potential of assertion in the different social groups in society from the clergy onwards to the commoners. For instance, the Catholic persecution and the Gunpowder Plot. In this context the monarch sought to naturalise the idea of the absolutist state. Sinfield uses documents such as the sentence passed upon Jane Wiseman in 1598, the works of George Buchanan to examine the formation of the absolutist state and Macbeth’s relation to the same. King James’ own work *Basilikon Doron* (1599) protected the idea of absolutism in the state by making a distinction between the “lawful good king” and the “usurping tyrant”. This distinction meant that an act of violence committed by the king was acceptable and in the latter it was a crime. Analysed against this distinction *Macbeth* becomes a play that can no longer, as Sinfield points out, be read in terms of a Jamesian reading. It has to be read also in terms of the disturbance created by the Buchanan text. He refers to Buchanan’s *De jure regni* (1579) and *History of Scotland* (1582). Keeping these in mind, Sinfield draws attention to Macduff who at the end of the play stands in the same relation to Malcolm, as Macbeth did to Duncan:

The Jamesian reading requires that Macbeth be a distinctively “evil” eruption in a “good” system; awareness of the role of Macduff in Malcolm’s state alerts us to the fundamental instability of power relations during the transition to absolutism, and consequently to the uncertain validity of the claim of the state to the legitimate use of violence. Certainly Macbeth is a murderer and an oppressive ruler, but he is one version of the absolutist ruler, not the polar opposite. (Nagpal, Payal. Ed. *William Shakespeare: Macbeth*. New Delhi: Worldview P, 2016. 226)

Sinfield makes a case for a clear political analysis of the play keeping in mind the relevance of the texts and documents of the time that found their way into the play or had a bearing on it in some manner.

A brief look at some of the debates of the time make Sinfield’s point clear. For instance, Catholic priests like Robert Parsons contested James’ right to the English throne in 1595 in *A Conference about the Next Succession to the Crown of England*. He raised the issue of the succession to the English throne, an issue not meant to be discussed at the time. Parsons also brought in the role of the commonwealth and challenged the “absolute” power of the monarch. Given the uneasy political context to England and Scotland, King James’ claim to the throne was not uncontested. He stated:

...albeit the nearness of each man’s succession in blood were evidently known, yet were it uncertain who should prevail, for that it is not enough for a man to be next only in blood, thereby to pretend a crown, but that other circumstances must concur, and he that is second, third, fourth, fifth or last, may lawfully be preferred before the first. (Carroll, William C. *Macbeth: Texts and Contexts*. New York: Bedfor/St. Martin’s, 1999. 195)

At the same time Henry Constable challenged the same in *A Discovery of a Counterfeit Conference* (1600). He explains how, “in most nations of the world, the people have lost all power of election; and succession is firmly settled in one descent, as before I have declared” (Carroll 204). James’ transition from the Scottish to the English throne was therefore troubled and conflict-ridden.

4.6 THE WITCHES IN *MACBETH*

Some of the most intriguing characters in *Macbeth* have been the witches. They have of course drawn a lot of attention. Early criticism has looked at them in terms of the influence of the evil forces and it has only with attempts to historicise them that the witches have been looked at as real beings. Recent critical inputs have helped understand them in the context of the debates around witchcraft. Before we analyse the witches as characters in *Macbeth* it is important to understand the nature of these debates around witches and witchcraft.

4.6.1 Debates around witches and witchcraft

The sixteenth century held particularly strong views regarding witches and they were fiercely condemned. Witch trials and executions were prevalent. The St. Osyth witch trials of 1582 and the North Berwick trials of 1591 are instances of the seriousness with which the monarch looked at the world of witchcraft. In 1563, Elizabeth passed a statute against witchcraft. Scotland also passed an act against witchcraft at the same time. This Act was introduced as a new statute again in 1604 by King James I. The Act stated:

That if any person or persons, after the said Feast of St. Michael the Archangell next comming, shall use, practise, or exercise any invocation or conjuration of any evil and wicked spirit: or shall consult, covenant with, entertaine, imploy, feed, or reward any evil and wicked spirit, to or for any intent or pupose; or take up any dead man, woman, or child, out of his, her, or their grave, or any other place where the dead body resteth; or the skin, bone, or any other part of any dead person, to be employed, or used in any manner of Witchcraft, Sorcery, Charme, or Inchantment, or shall use, practise, or exercise, any Witchcraft, Incantment, Charme or Sorcery, whereby any person shall be Killed, Destroyed, Wasted, Consumed, Pined, or Lamed, in His or Her body, or any part therof; that then every such Offender, or Offenders, their Ayders, Abettors, and Counsellors, being of the said offences duly and lawfully Convicted and Attainted, shall suffer paines of death as a Felon or Felons, and shall lose the priviledge and benefit of Clergy and Sanctuary. (Newton, John and Jo Bath *Witchcraft and the Act of 1604: Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008. 238)

Queen Elizabeth passed the Act in 1563 and King James I brought it back (encompassing a broader range of offenses” in 1604. This Act was finally revoked in 1736. Note that as per the Act, anyone who even invokes, consult or even covenants with the witches is liable to be punished. The Act reflected people’s belief in the supernatural and the world of witchcraft. The Acts passed by both the monarchs is an indication of their views on witchcraft.

The possible source texts for *Macbeth* mention the witches in different ways. John Major makes no mention of the witches and Buchanan talks of them as part of a dream. Holinshed’s *Chronicles* describes the meeting between Macbeth and the “weird sisters.” (See Illustration-1). Faith Nostbakken points out how Holinshed in the historical narrative of King Duff ‘s reign in Scotland “tells of rebels attempting to overthrow the king by seeking assistance from witches who are discovered one night secretly burning a wax image of the king and chanting incantations to try to destroy him through the power of evil spirits” (84). According to Nostbakken, Holinshed provides two contrasting views to the witches—the weird sisters are really “three goddesses with supernatural powers over human beings”, but Renaissance England with its belief on demons saw the witches as related to them. Are they the goddesses of destiny or do they signify demons? King James adopted a clear position and condemned them as evil in *Daemonologie* (1597). (See Illustration-2). But Reginald Scot dismissed this as superstition in *The Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584). The witches in *Macbeth* must be read against such sixteenth century debates that surrounded witchcraft. Scot wrote his book two years after the St. Osyth trials in which six were women were condemned to execution. In his book, Reginald Scot presents the witches as:

...women which be commonly old, lame, blear-eyed, pale, foul, and full of wrinkles; poor, sullen, superstitious and papists; or such as know no religion: in whose drowsy minds the devil hath gotten a fine seat; so as, what mischief, mischance, calamity, or slaughter is brought to pass, they are easily persuaded the same is done by themselves...They are lean and deformed, showing melancholy in their faces, to the horror of all that see them” (308).

To this he adds:

But whatsoever is reported or conceived of such manner of witchcrafts, I dare avow to be false and fabulous (cozenage, dotage and poisoning excepted): neither is there any mention made of these kind of witches in the Bible (Carroll 309).

In short, Scot sees them as old women, poor women and rejects any Biblical mention of the same. King James' concerns about witchcraft were well known. Scotland was more severe in its treatment of witchcraft. As a result the laws were implemented with greater severity. The Scottish Witchcraft Act was passed in 1563 and according to it those people were punished who invoked the witches for any purpose. The North Berwick trials of 1591 accused a group of people for plotting against the king. After the North Berwick trial and its relation to the plot against the monarch, King James took a stricter stance towards witchcraft in *Daemonologie*:

The fearful abounding at this time in this country, of these detestable slaves of the Devil, the witches, or enchanters, hath moved me to dispatch in this post, the following treatise of mine, not in any wise (as I protest) to serve for a show of my learning and ingine, but only (moved of conscience) to press thereby, so far as I can, to resolve the doubting hearts of many; both that such assaults of Satan are most certainly practised, and that the instruments thereof, merits most severely to be punished. (Carroll 325-326)

It is to be noted that the book was republished when James took over as monarch of England. The revision of the act and the re-publication of the text indicate the insecurities of the monarch regarding resistance especially through any alternative worldview. One can say that the witches are marked by a rebellious attitude that disturbs the monarch.

It is clear from these divergent attitudes to the 'witches' that there were people like Scot who saw witchcraft as "false and fabulous". And there was the monarch, be it Elizabeth or James, who reinforced belief in witches only to castigate them. In doing so, they created a polarity between the world of good as run by them and the world of evil of the witches that deserved to be punished. It is therefore not surprising that the sixteenth century is known for trials and subsequent execution of the witches. These were mostly women.

Illustration-1

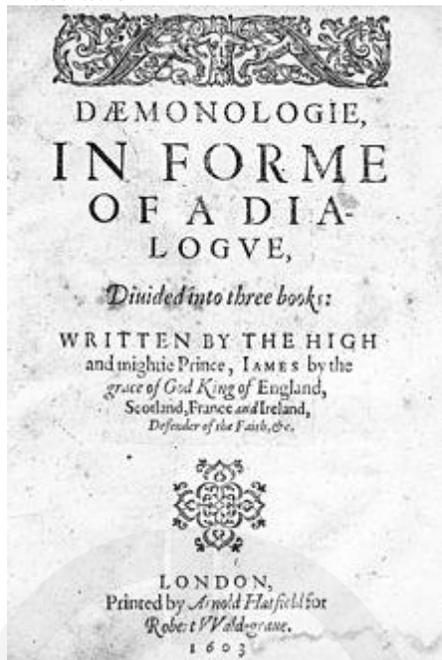


Macbeth and Banquo encountering the witches from Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1587)

(Source:

[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/84/Macbeth_and_Banquo_encountering_the_witches - Holinshed Chronicles.gif](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/84/Macbeth_and_Banquo_encountering_the_witches_-_Holinshed_Chronicles.gif))

Illustration-2



Title page of a 1603 reprinting of *Daemonologie*
(Source:

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/7/79/James_I%3B_Daemonologie%2C_in_forme_of_a_dialogue._Title_page._Wellcome_M0014280.jpg/220px-James_I%3B_Daemonologie%2C_in_forme_of_a_dialogue._Title_page._Wellcome_M0014280.jpg)

4.6.2 Terry Eagleton: “The Witches Are the Heroine of the Piece” (1986)

Eagleton analyses the context of the witches in *Macbeth*. According to Eagleton the real heroines of the play are the witches. He associates them with a “positive value” as he calls them, “Exiles from that violent order, inhabiting their own sisterly community on its shadowy borderlands, refusing all truck with its tribal bickerings and military honours’. The “riddling ambiguous speech” by the witches is another instance of their subversion of the structure of power. In that sense, the witches are considered by the critic to be the “unconscious’ of the drama” (211-212). Posing a threat to the normative society, this power needs to be repressed even as the possibility of its return remains a vital one. This argument is in line with our discussion of witches and witchcraft in terms of the debates and texts around it. They challenge the monarch’s power and the ones in power exercise control through legislation; the passing of an Act. In trying to quell these forces, the monarch’s ‘writing’ tries to contain the domain of witches and witchcraft.

Eagleton foregrounds these women as “androgynous (bearded women), multiple (three-in-one) and ‘imperfect speakers’. They undermine the “stable social, sexual and linguistic forms” which is essential for the working of the world in the play and even outside it. Take a look at the following lines by Eagleton:

Their words and bodies mock rigorous boundaries and make sport of fixed positions, unhinging received meanings as they dance, dissolve and re-materialise. But official society can only ever imagine its radical ‘other’ as chaos rather than creativity, and is thus bound to define the sisters as evil. Foulness—a political

order which thrives on bloodshed—believes itself fair, whereas the witches do not so much invert this opposition as invert *it*". (Nagpal, Payal. Ed. *William Shakespeare: Macbeth*. New Delhi: Worldview P, 2016. 213)

Eagleton traces the transgression by the Macbeths within history and the subversive nature of the witches within cyclical time. The use of the moon, dance, verbal repetition is seen as "inimical to linear history". For the critic, the witches know no narrative. Applying the logic of Marxism to the witches, Eagleton feels that once their energy is placed within the political context, it becomes a "freedom which remains enslaved to the imperative of power" and thus reproduces the same "oppressive law". As a result when Macbeth kills Duncan he attacks the body politic as also his own life. As a result, the Macbeths are "torn apart". But the witches are "mutable" and do not experience this kind of disintegration.

See Illustrations 3, 4 and 5 for an understanding of the way the witches in *Macbeth* have been depicted in visual art.

The Case of Lady Macbeth

In the play, Lady Macbeth instigates Macbeth to become a man by killing Duncan and claiming his due on the grounds of valour. As a woman character situated in the sixteenth century, Lady Macbeth can realise her ambition only viz-a-viz her husband. If Macbeth claims the throne, then in the process, Lady Macbeth too makes a 'strange' narrative of her own. She uses one that does not follow the syntax of normative society. The freedom in choice of words that she makes her own is only seen in the supernatural world of the witches. It is therefore no surprise that she has often been called the fourth witch. In studying the character of Lady Macbeth we need to understand her class concerns as also her use of language.

Terry Eagleton interprets Lady Macbeth in the following manner:

Like most of Shakespeare's villains, in short, Lady Macbeth is a bourgeois individualist for whom traditional ties of rank and kinship are less constitutive of personal identity than mere obstacles to be surmounted in the pursuit of one's private ends.(213-214)

Would it be correct to use the term "bourgeois individualist" for Lady Macbeth? To understand this, we need to place her character against a combination of changing gender and class discourses of the time. This was a world that was increasingly more mercantile than before, even as it continued under a monarch. It leads well into the Cromwellian period where the monarch has been executed and the republic established. This became possible with a group of traders and merchants becoming more important in the seventeenth century. To call Lady Macbeth a "bourgeois individualist" would then be appropriate. It is a world in which people are driven by their desires to acquire personal benefit. But in doing so they also flout the existing social mores. Lady Macbeth in her desire for power subverts the deterministic structures of the time. Boundaries have to be redrawn to accommodate personal interest. She can realise her ambition only as Macbeth seizes the crown. As Eagleton points out,

Lady Macbeth is akin to the three sisters in celebrating female power, but in modern parlance, she is a 'bourgeois' feminist who strives to outdo in domination and virility the very male system which subordinates her. Even so, it is hard to see why her bloodthirsty talk of dashing out babies' brains is any more 'unnatural' than skewering an enemy soldier's guts.

The world of violence, the unnatural is located well within the natural. It signals a world that is changing.

Illustration-3



Macbeth in the Witches' Cave by Henry Fuseli 1793

(Source:

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/2/24/Macbeth_consulting_the_Vision_of_the_Armed_Head.jpg/170px-Macbeth_consulting_the_Vision_of_the_Armed_Head.jpg)

Illustration 4



Macbeth and Banquo with the witches by Henry Fuseli

(Source:

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/a/a5/Macbeth_and_Banquo_with_the_witches_JHF.jpg/220px-Macbeth_and_Banquo_with_the_witches_JHF.jpg)

Illustration-5



Theodore Chassériau: Macbeth and Banquo meeting the witches on the heath

(Source: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/50/MacbethAndBanquo-Witches.jpg>)

Musee d' Orsay 1855

4.7 ENGLAND AND SCOTLAND

Another important perspective in analysing *Macbeth* critically is to look at it in terms of the tension between England and Scotland. By now, the dynamic of power must have become quite clear to you given that the play is set in Scotland and not in England. King James I united the thrones of Scotland and England. One can mark how the play negotiates between the two countries given the common perception of Scotland as feudal and England as showing the way ahead. In the play too, Macbeth creates anarchy in Scotland and it is a visit to England and exposure to King Edward the healer that the way ahead can be seen. Meanwhile it is of some use to look at the different perceptions of these two countries.

The perception of Scotland in the English mind was constructed in terms of a polarity with Scotland as feudal and rustic, and a difficult terrain. England was seen as more civilised in comparison to its neighbour. James VI was the son of Mary, Queen of Scots, and a Catholic who had unsuccessfully plotted the death of Elizabeth. She was executed in 1587. This meant that the relation between these two countries would have been strained. It also meant that James' claim to the English throne was not a natural one and could be contested. In short, the relation between England and Scotland was a complex one. This carried into common cultural perceptions as well. As Carroll points out:

English attitudes towards Scotland in the late sixteenth century were mixed, of course, but certainly anti-Scottish discourse pre-dominated...[It] comprised of maps, legends, unreliable histories, and occasionally, narratives of travellers who had actually gone to Scotland. Much of the English attitude, it seems, derived from the English project of nation-building and self-definition. (Carroll, William C. *Macbeth: Texts and Contexts*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999. 272).

One can see that the tension between the two nations would have taken a new form in the situation that James was to be the successor to the English throne. This would have been a matter of debate and discussion. But as James's ascent united the English and Scottish throne these views would have surely found creative representation. In setting the play in Scotland and presenting the English as a constructive ally to the Scots, Shakespeare is certainly raising complex issues.

4.8 LET US SUM UP

This unit would have given you a fair idea of the different trends in criticism on Shakespeare's *Macbeth* from the eighteenth century onwards. Today, we might base our understanding of the Bard's plays on current trends in literary criticism. But it is the legacy of Shakespearean criticism over the years that has led to debates and discussion of ideas brought out in the play.

4.9 GLOSSARY

Machiavellian:	The influence of Machiavelli's views expressed in <i>The Prince</i> . In it the strategy to be adopted by the usurper has been discussed.
Imagination:	The early nineteenth century privileged the faculty of imagination as against the idea of reason in the eighteenth century.
Normative:	The norms of the society formed by the dominant social group.
Culture:	in Marxist criticism, as per the base-superstructure model, culture is a part of the superstructure.
New Historicist:	This way of thinking combined the presence of cultural texts, visual art and other mediums to study a text of the period.
Cultural Materialism:	It combined a view to the hierarchies in society with the idea of culture and represented the point of view of marginal social groups.

4.10 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the key aspects of criticism on *Macbeth* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
2. Critically analyse Lady Macbeth as the fourth witch.
3. How do you interpret the role of the witches in *Macbeth*?
4. What were the different perceptions of the English about Scotland?
5. Analyse *Macbeth* from the point of view of Marxism.

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