

Macbeth and Early Stuart Politics

Professor Paulina Kewes in conversation with Dr Joseph Hone

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Joseph Hone: I'm sat here in the Fellows library at Jesus College, Oxford, with Professor Paulina Kewes and we're looking at Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*. Now *Macbeth* was one of the first plays that Shakespeare wrote after the accession of James I, the first Scot to become King of England and King of Scotland. So what was the impact of James's accession on Shakespeare's career?

Paulina Kewes: We often think of Shakespeare as an Elizabethan playwright. But in fact he spent a lot of his writing career and acting career under James I, and shortly after James's arrival Shakespeare's company (which was called Lord Chamberlain's Men) was renamed the King's Men. This meant that the members of the company became royal servants. The King's Men performed at court much more often than any other company, which again was quite lucrative. And it's worth remembering that Shakespeare was not only a playwright but also a sharer in the company and an actor. So obviously his fortunes were important for him financially as well as artistically. And he wrote a number of plays shortly after James's accession which engaged with that event. And *Macbeth* is one of those plays which definitely courted topicality.

JH: How so?

PK: The first performance of *Macbeth* took place sometime in 1606, roughly three years after James's accession, and of course the union of the crowns of England and Scotland. The new king pursued the project for a closer union between England and Scotland in Parliament. That was the ideal. But another very important event which serves as a backdrop for *Macbeth* is the so-called Gunpowder Plot, an abortive attempt by the disgruntled Catholics, unhappy that they had not been granted toleration at James's succession to blow up the King and Parliament in 1605. The idea of the plotters was to plant a huge quantity of gunpowder below the House of Lords at a time when the king, his wife (Anne, Queen of Denmark), and his two sons (the heir to the throne Prince Henry and his younger brother Prince Charles) would have been present there. So, essentially, had the plot succeeded most of the royal family and the political elite would have been wiped out. Now this attempt had been foiled. But, had it happened, the future of the monarchy would have been essentially in question. And following the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot naturally provoked an anti-Catholic backlash. Those involved had been tried and executed in a fairly gruesome manner.

JH: So this is a dark and dangerous sort of period, then. And I think, perhaps, we see that in the tone of *Macbeth* but what are the play's principal themes and how are they engaging with this context?

PK: *Macbeth* is a play set in a remote Scottish past. And it deals with rebellion, treason, king killing, and usurpation. However, the finale of the play sees the restoration of the rightful royal line. And of course another major theme is tyranny: as the play traces the rise and fall of

Macbeth, an ambitious Scottish general who murders King Duncan and takes his throne, the political prophecy famously delivered to Macbeth and Banquo by the three sisters (or the witches) raises questions about individual agency and fate. And, more generally, the supernatural, in the shape of the weird sisters or witches, ghosts, apparitions, creates the atmosphere of foreboding and terror. The supernatural further underlines the pervasiveness of evil and role of satanic powers which are precisely the kind of emotions and anxieties that were evoked by the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot.

JH: So *Macbeth* is definitely a play of its moment, then. Now I can see how a lot of these themes engage more generally in political ideas (tyranny and Scottish kingship in particular). But how are these specifically topically relevant to things like the Gunpowder Plot?

PK: Well there are actually two principal dimensions of topicality in *Macbeth*: the association with Scottish kingship; and the anxieties about the Gunpowder Plot. So let me tackle the first one. *Macbeth* is a play obsessively preoccupied about royal lineage, about kingship, about dynastic succession. We see that in the prophecies of the witches. They tell Macbeth that he will be king. Meanwhile they tell Banquo that he will be the father of kings, although he will not be king himself. Now that was deeply relevant because James I was a descendant of Banquo, and this is something that was actually widely known.

JH: So Banquo was a real person?

PK: Well, Banquo was one of the Kings of Scotland who had been thought to have been real at the time.

JH: Right.

PK: And we have genealogies tracing James's descent from Banquo. After James's accession the genealogies proliferated by way of emphasising his legitimacy and also as a compliment to the new [8:30] king. Now, what's interesting is that *Macbeth* traces a transition in Scottish history from the so-called tanistic principle of succession, where an adult male in the royal line succeeds, to more strictly hereditary succession, which was obviously the principle of succession that James asserted in his writings. He saw his right as hereditary. So at the outset of the play we see King Duncan nominate his son Malcolm as Prince of Cumberland, the heir to the throne, and that's something that seems threatening to Macbeth. By contrast, at the end Malcolm is actually seen as the rightful hereditary heir. In the middle we see Macbeth essentially elected to the throne after the murder of Duncan.

JH: So where in particular do we see that emphasis on dynastic succession? In the play itself, Paulina.

PK: One of the stage directions describes a show of eight kings and Banquo last with a glass in his hand: and a glass means a mirror. Macbeth is thrown and discombobulated by this vision and cries out in exasperation: 'What, will the line stretch out to th' crack of doom? / Another yet? A seventh? I'll see no more. And yet the eighth appears, who bears a glass / Which shows me many more, and some I see/ That twofold balls and treble sceptres carry'. Now this emphasis on treble sceptres is a very direct reference to James, because of course he held three crowns: the Crown of England and the Crown of Scotland and the Crown of Ireland. So what Shakespeare does is he invokes a number of topical themes: for instance this emphasis on treason. The very word treason appears throughout the play, but what we find there is the assassination of King Duncan, the emphasis on the chaos in nature which accompanies regicide: something again which is a very prominent motif in contemporary agitprop about the

Gunpowder Plot. And two other elements. The inclusion of witches. The witches on the one hand would have evoked associations with Stuart kingship in general, and in particular James I. He published a tract called *Daemonology* in which he endorsed the practice of witch hunting. So the presentation of the witches on the one hand obviously is fantastic spectacle, but, on the other, alludes to the king and emphasises the themes of Satanic intervention in human affairs. Perhaps the element of the play which was most directly relevant to the concerns raised by the Gunpowder Plot was its emphasis on so-called equivocation.

JH: Okay. So what's that?

PK: Well, prior to the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot the term equivocation wasn't particularly loaded; it simply referred to ambiguity in speaking. But one of those implicated in the Gunpowder Plot was the head Jesuit in England, Henry Garnet, and shortly after the capture of the Gunpowder plotters the government came across (and it was a complete accident! a tract called *A Treatise of Equivocation* which was written by Henry Garnett, and it essentially gave directions to Catholics how to behave under interrogation, how not to incriminate oneself, how not to incriminate others. and in practice what it meant was essentially telling lies. So the Gunpowder Plot was seen by the authorities as not only an evil deed which had been foiled. But its impact was seen as especially pernicious because it brought to light the way Catholics were being taught how to lie, how to dissimulate, how to be duplicitous. And we see a whole range of scenes and motifs which invoke forms of dissimulation, duplicity in the play. Of course the witches' prophecy is the prime example of that. The prophecy is ambiguous: should Macbeth actually do something in order to make it come true or should he simply let things be? But the very word equivocation appears several times in the play.

JH: Okay, so whereabouts? In what scenes are we seeing this word appear?

PK: There's this lovely scene which is unfortunately often cut in modern productions: where after Duncan's murder, we hear the knocking and the Macbeths make themselves scarce not to be discovered, and the Porter imagines himself being the Porter at the gates of hell giving access to the castle to various individuals. And he says knock knock...

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!

This equivocator who couldn't in fact equivocate his way to heaven is certainly Henry Garnett. And I have a very nice quotation which describes the way Garnett was denounced by his prosecutors. He was described as 'a doctor of dissimulation, deposing of Princes, disposing of kingdoms, daunting and deterring of subjects, and destruction'. And of course he suffered the death of traitors: he was hanged, drawn, and quartered in May 1606. And Macbeth himself realises towards the end of the play that he was the victim of equivocation, that the witches equivocated in their prophecy, and he says 'I pull in resolution and begin to doubt the equivocation of the fiend': in other words, having become a sort of fiend himself, he realises that he was duped by the witches and the devil.

JH: So how common a word was 'equivocation' at this time? It sounds as though Shakespeare couldn't have done this by mistake. He must have known the resonances of that word.

PK: He absolutely did. It was a word which had been used previously (and in fact Shakespeare himself uses it in *Hamlet*) but until the discovery of Garnet's tract it simply had not possessed the kind of resonance that it acquired afterwards.

JH: So we've got these two themes about Scottish kingship, lineage, and the Gunpowder Plot. How are these two disparate topics connected?

PK: Well actually they weren't so disparate as all that, because what the Gunpowder Plot might have done was to have wiped out pretty much the Stuart dynasty and what the play shows is the extraordinary threat to dynastic stability and the restoration of political order. And there's one other manner in which the two themes are brought together. It's often forgotten that the victory over Macbeth is possible because of English aid to the heirs of King Duncan, especially to Malcolm. This is very much a way of stressing the themes of union, of Anglo-Scottish amity. And there's one other lovely topical touch: the overthrow of Macbeth is possible because of the military aid of the English king, King Edward, Edward the Confessor. The term confessor is not used, but he is referred to as the pious Edward, so many in the audience would have been aware of his identity who has the special gift of curing scrofula (it's a particular kind of skin condition) by his royal touch. The illness at the time was called the King's Evil, and English monarchs such as Elizabeth touched those afflicted by the illness, and that was supposed to cure them. James resumed the practice after his accession to the English throne, and the play in describing Edwards practice, says the following: 'it's spoken the succeeding royalty he leaves the healing benediction'. So that very nicely connects with James, who the audience knew actually touched for the King's evil

JH: So James is a Scottish monarch like Banquo on the one hand, but a pious king like Edward on the other.

PK: Absolutely. And Shakespeare addresses all these themes in *Macbeth*.

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