

AQA English Literature GCSE

Macbeth: Context

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Background Information:

Shakespeare

Shakespeare is England's most **famous playwright**. He lived from **1564 – 1616**. His plays can be divided into Histories (e.g. Henry VI), Comedies (e.g. Midsummer's Nights Dream), and Tragedies (e.g. Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet).

For the majority of his career, Shakespeare wrote for the acting group the **Lord Chamberlain's Men** (who became known as the **King's Men** in 1603 when James I ascended the throne). Thus, his characters and writing style correspond to some of his most talented actors (Richard Burbage, for instance; most well known for his role as the first Romeo and the eponymous character Hamlet).

Shakespeare was writing during the **Renaissance**. The Renaissance was a period between the **14th and 17th centuries** where there was an expansion of artistic expression. This expression freed itself from the restrictions of previous centuries.

Plays were an incredibly popular and central medium of entertainment during the Elizabethan and **Jacobean era**. Macbeth is a history play (like Richard II and Henry IV) and was written in **1606** - a few years after the ascension to the throne of James VI of Scotland who succeeded as the **monarch of England in 1603 known as James I**.

Shakespeare's plays were a form of **mass entertainment** for Londoners during that period. The importance of entertainment as a function of the plays must be understood when studying them; **critical analysis** is important, but should not detract from the bigger-picture view that these were first and foremost written to **entertain**.

History of Macbeth

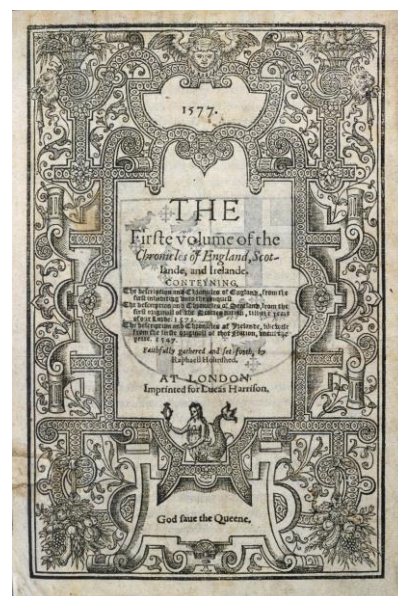
Genre

Macbeth is a **dramatic tragedy**. It follows his classic **five-act structure**. The tragedy surrounds the **protagonist Macbeth**, and the witches act as **catalysts** for the play's events.

- **Hamartia**: Hamartia is an ancient Greek term first used by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. It literally means '**fatal flaw**'. A character's fatal flaw is the thing that leads to their **ultimate downfall** - in Macbeth's case it is his ambition and lust for power that led to his inevitable downfall and is the arc of play between him and his wife.



<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Shakespeare.jpg> CC-BY-SA-4.0



https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/bd/1577_printing_of_Holinshed%27s_Chronicles.jpg
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- **Catharsis**: This is also an ancient Greek term that means the ‘**purging**’ or ‘**cleansing**’ of emotions, particularly through pity and fear, that the audience experiences at the end of a tragedy. It results in renewal and restoration. Aristotle applied the term to literature in his *Poetics*, arguing that catharsis was the ultimate end of a tragic work, and that achievement of a catharsis in the audience was a mark of a tragedy’s quality. **Macbeth’s self-destructive actions climax in Act 5**, when he is stripped of his majesty, loses his wife and then his own life. This leads the audience to **pity Macbeth** and as such, the audience experiences catharsis.

Macbeth source texts

The original source of the story of Macbeth comes from **Holinshed's Chronicles (1577)**, which is a large work describing the **collaborative histories** of England, Scotland and Ireland. Although this is a **historical document**, most now believe that the narrative is now **more legend than truth**. **Holinshed's Chronicles** was the main source for many of the history plays of Shakespeare.

Another influence for Shakespeare’s Macbeth is **Holinshed's ‘Historie of Scotlande’**. There is also some evidence to suggest that the play in part may have been written by someone else. Some suggest **Thomas Middleton** could have written it as there are some lines in Macbeth, particularly the songs and dances from the witches, which follow the words from Middleton’s play **The Witch**. While this served as a basis for the plot of Macbeth, Shakespeare did take many **artistic liberties** both to make it better for the stage and to attend to the political needs and preferences of the time.

The following table compares Shakespeare’s did take several liberties from **Holinshed's ‘Historie of Scotlande’**, here are **3 main ones and the motivation for the changes**.

The Original	The Change	The Motive
In the original source, while Macbeth commits sins and terrible acts, he was a good king for 10 years .	Shakespeare characterises Macbeth as cruel and tyrannical . Due to the unjust way that he ascended the throne, he must use violence and terror to consolidate his power. He declares that “blood will have blood” which illustrates the cycle of violence which Macbeth has initiated.	The main cause for this change was for dramatic purposes for the stage. The violence that was added simply made for a more interesting plotline. Additionally, it shows support for the belief in the Divine Right of Kings , because Macbeth was not the divinely chosen ruler his reign was corrupted . Shakespeare explores the consequences of assassinating a divinely crowned king .
In the original, Holinshed's Chronicles the weird sisters were called the ‘ goddesses of destine ’.	Shakespeare changed the ‘ goddesses of destine ’ to just three simple Elizabethan witches . This limits their	The Jacobean era was intensely religious and witchcraft was sinful as it was of the devil and not of



	<p>power, giving Macbeth choice and agency, making him responsible for his actions.</p>	<p>God. However, people still believed in witchcraft: witch hunts were a known and practised activity. King James was also interested in the topic, even writing a book called 'Daemonologie'. By reducing the power of the witches, Shakespeare delegitimises their power. This may have done to appeal to the audience and monarch of the time.</p>
<p>In the original work, Banquo is a partner with Macbeth to kill King Duncan.</p>	<p>In Shakespeare's version, Banquo is not an accomplice to the murder and is an honourable man.</p>	<p>Shakespeare may have changed this for the sake of King James I to please him as James I was a patron of Shakespeare. James I believed that he could trace his lineage to Banquo (even though Holinshed's Chronicles is mainly legend). For this reason, Banquo had to be good.</p>

Jacobean Era

Macbeth was written during the reign of King James I, who was a supporter of and a **patron** of Shakespeare's work. This consequently meant that Shakespeare was **greatly influenced by the king**. Evidence of this can be seen throughout the plot of Macbeth and the changes that Shakespeare made to the original story of Macbeth.

The Jacobean time was one of uncertainty and tension due to the way that King James I came to power, and so the work which Shakespeare produced during this period tended to **reflect this mood**.

King James I

The history surrounding King James I is vital for a deeper understanding of the **Scottish tragedy**, as in some ways **the life of King James I can be referred to as a Scottish tragedy**.

There was a significant amount of uncertainty at the end of Queen Elizabeth's reign because she had no heir. In the life of James his **parents were Mary I, Queen of Scots and his father was Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley**. His mother, Mary I was imprisoned and forced to abdicate the throne and so a one-year-old James VI became the King of Scotland and never saw his mother again. Later **in 1587, when James was 31, his mother was**



https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b0/King_James_I_of_England_and_VI_of_Scotland_by_John_De_Critz_the_Elder.jpg CC-BY-SA-4.0



executed by **Queen Elizabeth I** and prior to this, when James was 8 months old, his father was assassinated by an explosion at their family home. When James took his position as the King of Scotland he made an **alliance with Elizabeth I securing his place as her successor**.

Witchcraft

King James I, had a great interest in the supernatural and witchcraft, so much so that he wrote a book called '**Daemonologie**' (1597), meaning 'the science of demons'. The book was **published in 1603** when he became the King of England, and was reprinted twice during his reign. James I firmly believed that witchcraft was an act of Satan and the way one became one was by making a deal with the devil to get some sort of supernatural power.

Daemonologie may have also been a source for Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, as many of the practices of the witches in the play agreed with the beliefs which king James had.

The book was a dialogue in which James **extensively explained his beliefs on witchcraft**, aiming to bring to light evidence which would warrant the claim and also justify the **death penalty** as a punishment for witchcraft. The book was split into three parts:

- **Magic** and **necromancy**
- **Witchcraft** and **sorcery**
- **Spirits** and **spectres**

The purpose of the book was not just to provide evidence for witchcraft for those who did not believe; it was also for those who did believe to **inspire** them to carry out **witch hunts**. Witch-hunting was known and accepted practice in the time of Elizabeth I's reign, however, the number of trials and executions were not very high.

Witch-hunt: The term witch-hunt in modern terms can have a different meaning. It is sometimes used to describe situations in which the larger public harasses those with unpopular opinions, particularly in the context of politics

In contrast, Scotland had severe laws against witchcraft. After James published his book the cases of **witchcraft skyrocketed by 53%**. After James became the king of England he increased the severity of the law regarding witchcraft. He enacted a new law in 1604 a year after he became king, the name of the act was '**An Act against Conjuratiō, Witchcraft and Dealing with Evil and Wicked Spirits**'. This act made witchcraft a felony punishable by death and removed interference from the clergy.

Divine right of kings

James I believed in the **divine right of kings**, so he believed that he was chosen by God to be the king of England and the righteous judge of England. He believed in witch trials and witch hunts not only out of a moral conviction, but also, due to the fact that he was **ordained by God**, he had a **supernatural duty to complete witch-hunts**. Furthermore, in the **Great Chain of Being**, the king is the closest being to God on Earth. Because of this close relationship, it was the role of the king to enact the will of God - which James believed was to rid the earth of witchcraft, and therefore witches.

Before this, in **1589** when James was just the King of Scotland (rather than King of Scotland and England), his **soon-to-be wife, Anne of Denmark**, was supposed to set sail to meet him.



However, due to rough weather she was unable to complete the journey. James decided to go on the journey to get his **betrothed** himself, but on the way, he and his men were attacked by the **deadly weather**. James believed that the only cause of this was **witchcraft**. Afterwards, when James returned to Scotland, he launched a **witch hunt** on a scale that had not been seen before in the town of **North Berwick** in which **70 suspects** were rounded up and **tortured into confessing their use of magic and then brutally burned at the stake**. After this James commissioned a pamphlet detailing the events and then soon after he wrote and published his book '**Daemonologie**' (1597).

While James was a **religious fanatic**, it can be argued that that was not the origin of all his strong beliefs on witchcraft. King James I was **deeply misogynistic**, which can be attributed to the **patriarchal times** he lived in. Evidence of James's **misogynistic views** can be found in his book **Daemonologie** in which he asserted that only women could be witches because they were the '**weaker sex**' and so could be easily entrapped by the '**snares**' of the devil. James I, saw the Bible as evidence of this belief; he looked to the story of **Adam and Eve**, believing that because Eve was the one that was **tricked by the serpent**, it shows that women are more easily **influenced** and **persuaded** to the side of evil and so **only women could be witches**.

Witchcraft in Macbeth

Witchcraft plays a large part in *Macbeth* and provides a basis for the events of the play. King James's beliefs definitely played a role in this, **influencing Shakespeare's literary decisions**. For example, the expedition which James took is incorporated into the play, the line '**Though his bark cannot be lost/Yet it shall be tempest-tossed**' is potentially a reference to the storm that James experienced on his way to Denmark.

The witches in the play serve many purposes. Not only do they set the pace for the play, but they also serve as a **warning against witchcraft, evil and bloodshed**. There are **parallels** in the tragedy between the witches and the **three Fates in Greek mythology** who were in charge of the destinies of mortals and who spun the weave of the lives of humans. Similarly, **Hecate** in *Macbeth* who was the witches' mistress, in **Greek mythology she was the goddess of witchcraft**.

The Scottish tragedy starts with the words of the witches and ends in **blood and carnage**. By creating discord and confusing the line of succession only evil and bloodshed came to be. This is a warning to the English people about witchcraft and evil - it is both a sin against God as well against the state; in the words of King James I witchcraft is "**high treason against God**".

Some have even argued that **Lady Macbeth** is the **fourth witch** in the play, due to her passion and her power and ambition. Sometimes women in power were attacked and accused of witchcraft.



https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/b/b3/Macbeth_and_the_Witches_%28Barker%2C_1830%29.jpg/707px-Macbeth_and_the_Witches_%28Barker%2C_1830%29.jpg CC-BY-SA-4.0



Great Chain of Being

This was an ideological belief circulating this time, which originated from the ancient Greek **philosophers Aristotle and Plato**. The Great Chain of Being was a conception of the universe in which everything, plant, animal or mineral, had a fixed place, according to its important and spiritual nature. This hierarchy started with God, under whom came then the king. At the bottom of the Great Chain of Being were the rocks. The Great Chain of Being explains why the sin of regicide and the resulting punishment was perceived as such a serious sin. When Lord and Lady Macbeth conspired and killed King Duncan, not only did they commit a carnal sin, and a sin against the state, but also a sin against the order of the universe. According to the Great Chain of Being, the King should rule commoners, who should accept their place. Macbeth's actions distort the natural order of the universe, setting off **chaos** and **bloodshed**.

Divine Right of Kings/ Gunpowder Plot

The gunpowder plot was a failed conspiracy by some Catholics to assassinate the king and parliament on **November 5th 1605**. The Divine Right of Kings was a belief that God had specifically chosen monarchs to rule the country and so an attempt to kill the one God had chosen was not just a worldly sin but actually a sin against God. This belief system is seen in *Macbeth* as it is possible that the tragic consequences of Lord and Lady Macbeth are because they did not just commit a carnal sin but they also sinned against God, for which the punishment is **eternal damnation**. *Macbeth* can be seen as a warning against **regicide** and a **representation** of what could happen if any of the audience attempted it. James I believed that the gunpowder plot was an act of witchcraft and allusions of this can be seen in *Macbeth* through the quote **'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'** (Act II, Scene III).

When James was the King of Scotland his title was King James VI but when he became the King of England his title was then King James I because there had never been a King of England called James.

The king's beliefs regarding witchcraft and the divine right of kings changed the mood of England, and were a direct contrast to the **'Golden Age'** of Elizabeth I's reign. The witch trials and hunts that took place during James' reign and resulted in thousands of deaths marked a dark time in English and Scottish history. This dark mood pervades *Macbeth*, a story in which **higher forces 'control' and dictate the lives of people**. Through *Macbeth*, the viewer is able to see the terrible consequences of what happens when power is given to these forces of darkness.

Religion

During this period in England, there was a lot of **religious conflict** between **Catholicism** and **Protestantism**. Both are denominations of Christianity, but there were (and still are) core **differences or contradictions in their beliefs**. It was customary to have the state's religion dictated by the ruling monarch. **Jacobean England** was Protestant since James I was also. At this time, when a certain religion was dominant or official, **adherents to other religions or denominations were treated very cruelly** - often killed for their faith. For this reason, when James I became king many Catholics believed that James I would treat them better, since his mother Queen Mary of Scots was Catholic. However, James, who was a Protestant, did not and this was a part of the reason for the gunpowder plot hatched by a group of Catholics.



The Protestant Reformation did not happen until the **16th century**. *Macbeth*, on the other hand, is set in the 11th century, when Protestantism did not exist. Despite this, in the Scottish tragedy, Shakespeare considers a lot of religious debates such as **predestination vs free will** and **forgiveness vs suffering**. These debates reflect key differences between Protestantism and Catholicism. There are also religious allusions throughout *Macbeth*.

- **Religious allusions:** There are similarities between **Adam and Eve** and Lord and Lady Macbeth. Lady Macbeth persuades her husband to sin just as Eve persuaded Adam. Lady Macbeth's **ambition and thirst for power**, like Eve's, leads to their ultimate demise.
- **Predestination vs free will:** Predestination is the belief that before we are born God has already decided whether we are going Heaven or Hell, and there is **nothing in life that you can say or do that can change this**. In contrast, free will is the belief that we have **choices** in everything we do, and these choices determine where we end up after we die. This **theological debate** plays out in *Macbeth*. It can be argued that Macbeth is just a victim of predestination through the **prophecies of the witches**. On the other hand, it is possible that Macbeth is only a **victim unto himself**.
- **Forgiveness vs suffering:** It has long been **debated theologically** whether suffering is necessary for true forgiveness to take place. This debate is considered in *Macbeth*; some can argue that because of Macbeth's sins he is beyond forgiveness. This belief may have been what led to Lady Macbeth's suicide.



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Setting

While *Macbeth* was **written in England 1606**, the setting is in **11th-century Scotland**, which was the homeland of King James I. The setting and weather that Shakespeare chose **reflect the mood** of *Macbeth* and **pathetic fallacy** is used as a tool to create a more in-depth experience, so that the audience can be completely absorbed by the play's atmosphere. **Scotland is a dark and moody place**, and the dark and mood weather Shakespeare specifies is used to reveal the tone of the play and even Macbeth's character.

The play starts with **bleak weather** as the witches describe the first battle scene with Macbeth as being **'fog and filthy air'** (Act I Scene I). The fog represents the **uncertainty** and **mystery** surrounding the play's events - the audience will have been deeply unsure about what would unfold. That the air is 'filthy' also points to **moral degradation**. The role of the witches is **uncertain at the beginning of the play**. As the events unfold things don't particularly become clearer, and likewise the fog is something that remains throughout. At the end of Act I Scene I, the witches say that **'fair is foul and foul is fair'**, this is to say that things have been reversed (and morality



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Foggy_forest.jpg CC-BY-SA-4.0



has been turned upside down). This may be **foreshadowing** how the unsettling of the **Great Chain of Being** through regicide.

Where was it performed?

While **The Globe** (an Elizabethan playhouse on the Southbank, London) was Shakespeare's theatre, the **first probable performance** of Macbeth was in front of James I and King Christian IV of Denmark, his brother-in-law, on **August 7, 1606** at the **Great Hall at Hampton Court Palace**. Legend said that the boy actor who was to play Lady Macbeth, Hal Berridge, became very sick and so Shakespeare had to take over the role. Berridge later died, and this is where the tale of the play being **cursed** comes from. After this, the **first performance in public** was then at **The Globe on April 1611**.

Women were not allowed to act so female characters (incl. Lady Macbeth) were generally played by pre-pubescent boys

The Curse

It is a common belief that the play is **cursed**. Another supposed origin of this belief is a story about a **coven of witches** who cursed the play because Shakespeare used real spells and incantations. There were a **long line of accidents** and issues which followed the first production and provides weight for this belief. A part of this superstition is that, in order **to break the curse or at least avoid the curse**, you must not say the play's name, and once you leave the theatre you must spin three times, spit, then curse, then finally knock on the theatre of the door to enter go back in again.



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Globe_Theatre_Innenraum.jpg CC-BY-SA-4.0,3.0,2.5,2.0,1.0

Production History

- **1606:** A young boy, Hal Berridge, supposed to play Lady Macbeth for the play's first performance. He fell ill beforehand and later died.
- **1663:** Sir William Davenant restored the play and turned it into a **semi-musical**, where the witches sing and dance.
- **1849:** The American actor Edwin Forrest and English actor William Charles Macready played Macbeth in two rival performances in New York. This led to **Astor Place Riot**, in which **100 were injured and 20 died**.
- **1998:** **Piccolo Theatre of Rome** did an **Italian reconstruction** of Macbeth which took place in a modern world of **street gangs**.
- **2001:** Production at the **Globe Theatre** the witches were **slapstick clowns**.

What literary critics think

- ★ In Macbeth there is an explicit amount of bloodshed. The critic Robert Reed argues that Macbeth enacted all the death to smother his conscience and kill his essentially moral nature. That Macbeth's nature is essentially moral is evidenced by his guilt.
- ★ **Cakebread** adopts a **feminist perspective** and argues that the witches **deconstruct the traditional binary ideas about femininity and masculinity**, as they are powerful beings



who are described as having “beards”. Furthermore, Lady Macbeth is willing to forsake her femininity so that she is able to do what has to be done and kill Duncan. In Act 1 Scene 5 she says “unsex me here, And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood”. Thus, she is able to act in a ‘masculine’ way and **subvert gendered expectations**, which were particularly strong in the Jacobean era.

What does context mean for your exam?

AO3

AO3 is the understanding of **the relationship between the ideas in the text and that text’s contexts** (including **social, historical/ political, literary** and **biographical**).

Context is assessed **throughout** the paper. The strand in the mark scheme related to AO3 references ‘ideas/perspectives/contextual factors’. However, if a question requires a student to think about the text in its context, this is also reflected inherently through the response to the task.

The context may relate to **various factors**:

- The relationship between the text and the **context in which it was written and/or the context within which the text is set**.
- You may also consider literary contexts such as which **genre** the text is from - for example, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is a gothic text.
- You can also consider the contexts in which texts are engaged with by **different audiences** - for example *An Inspector Calls* was set in 1912 but was watched by audiences in 1945 who would have a different opinion about what takes place compared with an audience watching it now.

When thinking about context you can consider factors such as location, social structures and features, cultural contexts, and periods in time. Acknowledgement of the universality of a literary text is an integral part of relating to it contextually.

Exam Tip

The range of contexts and relationships that are more relevant for your AO3 which will depend on the text and the author of your text. Within your exam you need to be able to select which context is **relevant to the question you are answering and the point you are trying to make**

Essay writing tip

It is important that the contextual information provided is directly relevant, rather than being ‘bolted on’ to the end of a paragraph or essay. When writing your response, you should include relevant context to illustrate and develop your interpretation of the question. Don’t just write everything you know about Shakespeare and Elizabethan / Jacobean England!

