
UNIT 1 *MACBETH: AN INTRODUCTION*

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 The Elizabethan World
- 1.3 Humanist Thought
- 1.4 Machiavelli's *The Prince* and James's *Basilikon Doron*
- 1.5 Drama in the Renaissance World
 - 1.5.1 Stage in the Elizabethan Period
 - 1.5.2 The Globe Theatre
- 1.6 Drama and Censorship in Elizabethan England
- 1.7 Date of the Play
- 1.8 Sources of *Macbeth*
- 1.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.10 Glossary
- 1.11 Questions
- 1.12 Suggested Readings

1.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will acquaint you with the England of Shakespeare's time. It will help you understand the social setting of the period as well as the changes that set in from the reign of Elizabeth. It will also introduce you to Machiavelli's thought. The chapter will also trace briefly the evolution of the stage in Shakespeare's time to help you visualise the experience of theatre-going in those days. This will be followed by a discussion of the historical sources used by Shakespeare for *Macbeth* and the possible date of the play. There will also be a discussion of the idea of humanism and its relation to the world of Shakespeare's plays.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit goes into the aspects of thought and perspective that shaped Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. In our view nothing traditional helped to make sense of whatever was happening in the field of English drama in the closing years of the sixteenth century. Instances coming to mind are the humanist thought and Machiavelli giving version of conceptualising the new scenario. Secondly, within drama, experimentation and innovation were resorted to, for capturing the unfolding trend. Stage in the Elizabethan period and sources of the play *Macbeth* are other crucial areas covered in this unit.

1.2 THE ELIZABETHAN WORLD

Renaissance literally means a re-birth or awakening. It was a rebirth of Classical Greek and Latin literature. It began in the latter half of the sixteenth century and continued into the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It has been divided into early, middle-high and late Renaissance (Cuddon 739). The sixteenth century, or the period of high renaissance was rife with changes that led to a re-orientation of the relation between man and the world he inhabited. The renaissance period was marked by a relook at the classics and this helped writers posit a new idea of man who was at the centre of the scheme of things. As the ideas of the renaissance spread to different parts of the world writers responded creatively through various mediums to interpret the position of man in the cosmos. Development in scientific ideas, a shift from the Ptolemaic idea of the universe to that of Copernicus brought in modern view things. Copernicus was to prove that the earth was not the centre of the universe, but it was the sun and the former was only a planet revolving around the latter. This shift was not merely astronomical and had an impact on the way in which man was perceived in the universe. The idea of man at the centre of things was effectively deflected. He was to be seen as part of a kind of organic unity in the universe. The displacement of the

earth, meant that the social groups that were at the centre of things could also be displaced. Coupled with the wisdom of the classics a new phase set in and formed the backdrop to the Elizabethan period.

This was a time of major changes. The authority of the church stood challenged in the protest by King Henry VIII. He wanted to divorce his wife Catharine of Aragon and marry Anne Boleyn. At the outset divorce appeared to be the issue, otherwise not permitted under Catholicism. But at a deeper level this was about consolidating the authority of the monarch and challenging that of the Pope of Rome and the Church. This led to what is known as the period of Reformation and the establishment of Protestant faith. It was followed by a move to restore the powers of the church through Counter-Reformation. But the split in the church had been effected and Protestantism had been established. As Elizabeth came to power she had to contend with dissatisfaction amongst the Catholics and had to struggle to establish her sovereignty.

Under Elizabeth, England moved towards various levels of social mobility. At the level of religion, the Anglican settlement tried to create peace amongst the religious factions. Through the settlement she managed to keep the Protestant spirit alive. In the economic sphere, England was gradually transforming itself into a world of mercantile capital. In the world of kings and queens and the nobility, the traders and merchants also gained both mobility and power in the form of money. This is the world to which Shakespeare belonged. According to Boris Ford:

Though most of Elizabeth's five-million subjects were country dwellers, their prosperity depended on foreign trade; and all the main events of the reign were connected with the rise of merchant capital—the long duel with Spain, ranging from Ireland to the Indies; the raids on Spanish treasure; the sudden expansion of English trade to touch all four of the known continents. (Ford, Boris, ed. *Age of Shakespeare: A Guide to English Literature*. Volume 2. London: Cassell, 1955.17)

The feudal world of England was churning. It was not as if it had transformed itself into a kind of capitalist economy. But one can see the presence in the feudal world of new forces that were gradually gaining power, especially in the wake of travel and trade in other countries. A nobility that was gradually becoming economically weak also meant that other social groups especially the ones who were trading would gain power. The consolidation of power by Elizabeth could be seen in works of literature. Sidney's *Arcadia* (1580) and Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590) evidence the power wielded by the queen. The defeat of the Spanish forces with the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 further helped Elizabeth consolidate her reign. But the influx of renaissance ideals, the displacement of earth from the centre and the renewed interest in man meant that these ideas would no longer be accepted unquestioningly. Coupled with the economic changes in society there was a new ferment brewing in sixteenth century England. The gentry remained connected to the court even as it started pursuing its own monetary interests. By the end of the sixteenth century they were much better placed and tried to buy estates and be on a par with the nobility.

As Robert Weiman points out,

It was an age of social compromise and economic confusion which yet achieved, politically, a temporary stability and a cultural balance distinctly its own. In the sphere of economics, traditional forms of trade and agriculture existed side by side with the newly emerging modes of capitalist enterprise, and an unprecedented and often conflicting number of heterogeneous developments and activities resulted. The growth of the market, first for commodities, then for land and labour and finally for money, the development of an extensive cloth industry serving overseas export markets (which accelerated enclosures), the extraordinary influx of gold and silver, and the remarkable rise in prices—these and their concomitant factors had proved powerful dissolvents of the traditional economy. (Kettle, Arnold. *Shakespeare in a Changing World: Essays on His times and His Plays*. New York: International Publishers, 1964. 20)

In short you can see that the period of Elizabeth's reign was relatively stable and yet rife with changes at the level of both social and economic structure. The amorphous social group that was gaining gradual

ascendancy was that of the merchants and traders. At the same time the conception of man in society and its representation in literature underwent change. In a more scientific environment, the individual man came to the centre of things.

1.3 HUMANIST THOUGHT

One of the chief ideas that the renaissance brought in was that of a humanistic ideal. From an earlier time when man's relationship with god was a subject of artistic and literary depiction, the renaissance with its scientific thrust looked at man in his own world, rather than one that was not seen. Humanism explored man in terms of its relationships with the people around. As Arnold Kettle explains:

The humanist tradition cannot be described as though it were a set of unchanging ideas, much less a revealed philosophy. It implies, rather, an evolving outlook which has developed with man's increasing knowledge and control of the world he lives in and hence of his own destinies...Humanism in the very nature of things can only be seen and understood in terms of actual human experience and history. (Kettle 11)

Humanism can therefore be looked at as a movement that restored to man the dignity of existence. Man was to be seen, observed and looked at in terms of his relationships with other beings. The idea of man controlling his own destiny becomes sharply felt. Shakespeare too partook of these ideas as he belonged to this world of the late sixteenth century infused with socio-economic changes and humanist ideals. As V.G. Kiernan states, "Shakespeare was in search of fresh and living, instead of fossilized, connections. His quest was part of the all-round emancipation of the individual that was unfolding" (Kettle 50). Towards the latter part of the sixteenth century the individual came at the centre of things.

Whereas Elizabeth's rule was a period of stability, it was not without its rebellious forces. Two very famous incidents from this period were the Northern rebellion of 1569 and the Essex rebellion of 1601. In the former, the Catholics felt side-lined in the court and rebelled against Elizabeth favouring Mary Queen of Scots. The Elizabethan Settlement suggested a median between the different faiths but was not acceptable to all. This was followed by other plots to remove Elizabeth. But the next significant uprising was from within the court by the Earl of Essex. The Essex Rebellion was led by the Earl of Essex, Sir Robert Devereux in 1601. After his failure to curb the Irish rebellion he returned and was spurned by Elizabeth. Interestingly, A.L. Morton explains the chief cause of the rebellion of the Earl of Essex differently. The Queen had given him the "monopoly" for the sale of "sweet wine" for ten years. But her refusal to renew it created discontent in him. One of the reasons for this was the rise of a group of people who resisted such monopolization in trade and put forth their own interests (Morton 178). In any case, the "rebel" was a figure who had no position and sanction according to religious discourse. In a Church homily the figure of the rebel is explained thus:

Thus you see that all God's laws are by rebels violated and broken, and that all sins possible to be committed against God or man be contained in rebellion: which sins, if a man list to name by the accustomed names of the seven capital or deadly sins, as pride, envy, wrath, covetousness, sloth, gluttony, and lechery, he shall find them all in rebellion, and amongst rebels. (Abrams, M.H. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Sixteenth Century The Early Seventeenth Century*. New York and London: Norton, 2000. 558)

It is therefore no surprise that in 1585, in the light of various attempts on Elizabeth's life, "An Order of Prayer and Thanksgiving for the Preservation of the Queen's Majesty's Life and Safety" was read in the Church of England. It stated, when "a traitorous subject...lay violent hands upon her royal person and to have murdered her. But still the blessed eye of Thy blessed providence did either prevent him by some sudden interruption of his endeavour or, by the majesty of her person and princely behaviour towards him, didst strike him so abashed that he could not perform his conceived bloody purpose" (Stump 343). Through this prayer, the Queen's position is divinely ordained and all rebellion is qualified as evil and as a result quelled in this war between good and evil.

1.4 MACHIAVELLI'S *THE PRINCE* AND JAMES'S *BASILIKON DORON*

Niccollo Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1513) focussed on a new discourse of politicking and its working in the state. In it, one can mark the advent of the "usurper," a shift from the king as divinely ordained. Machiavelli raises the question of how a ruler must preserve his power; whether the ruler must employ cruelty to preserve his power or not. Further, should the ruler be feared or loved. The answers to these questions make us aware of the changes setting in the Renaissance period in Italy and its impact in England. Take a look at Machiavelli's writing in *The Prince*:

Hence we may learn the lesson that on seizing a state, the usurper should make haste to inflict what injuries he must, at a stroke, that he may not have to renew them daily, but be enabled by their discontinuance to reassure men's minds, and afterwards win them over by benefits. Whosoever, either through timidity or from following bad counsels, adopts a contrary course, must keep the sword always drawn, and can put no trust in his subjects, who suffering from continued and constantly renewed severities, will never yield him their confidence. (Machiavelli, Nicollo. *The Prince* (1513), Harvard Classics collection. New York: Collier, 1910.33-34)

The Renaissance began in Italy and its focus on the individual in society at the centre of things has interesting manifestations. The idea of individual dignity works in different ways. In the context of the idea of Kingship, mark the attention given to the "usurper". The divine sanctity of the king is challenged by the usurper. Machiavelli, in his treatise, suggests both the method of operation and the sustenance of rule for the usurper. In the context of England, under the veneer of the divinely elected monarch, one can also sense a challenge to it in the form of contesting claims and political unrest. Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of King Richard II* is an example of these changes in the relation between the monarch and the society. In fact to the question of whether the monarch must be "feared or loved" Machiavelli explains:

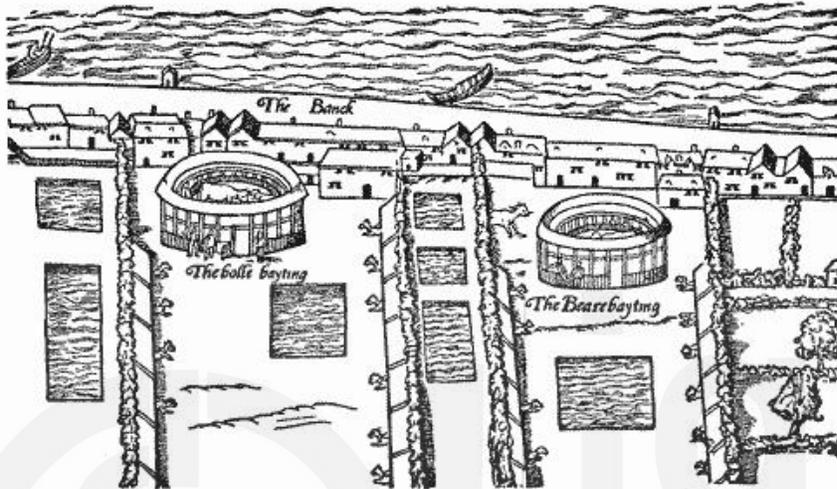
And here comes in the question whether it is better to be loved rather than feared, or feared rather than love. It might perhaps be answered that we should wish to be both; but since love and fear can hardly exist together, if we must choose between them, it is far safer to be feared than loved. (57-58)

In contrast to a work like Machiavelli's *The Prince* is King James' *Basilikon Doron* (1599). It too delves into ideas about the monarch, 'good' governance and his relationship to his subjects. The title is a "Greek phrase translated as 'kingly gift'." (Nostbakken, Faith. *Understanding Macbeth: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources and Historical Documents*. London: The Greenwood P, 1997. 45). In it King James explains the difference between the "good king and a usurping tyrant." Where the former is answerable to God and is "ordained for his people." The latter considers "his people to be ordained for him." Honour for the good king meant a "due discharge of his calling." But for the tyrant it rested in a realisation of his "ambitious pretences." This was of course in contrast to Machiavelli's ideas. But what is more important to understand is the fact that the idea of a monarch and a 'good' monarch was a contested one. This meant that change was setting in, in the way issues related to monarchy were perceived by the people. The seventeenth century with the execution of Charles I and the establishment of Cromwellian republic is an example of the same. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* written and performed at the beginning of the seventeenth century carries within it the seed of this unrest.

1.5 DRAMA IN THE RENAISSANCE WORLD

1.5.1 Stage in the Elizabethan Period

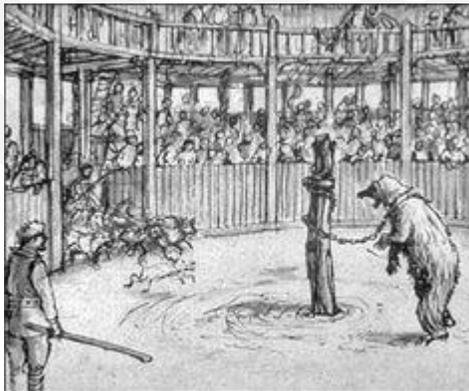
Illustration-1



Bear-baiting rings

(Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a4/Bear_and_bull-baiting_rings%2C_Bankside%2C_London_c.1560.png)

Illustration-2



(Source: <https://i.pinimg.com/236x/52/a3/63/52a363a79179ffe7988bb4a8e86f4f30--pictures-of-bears-twelfth-night.jpg>)

Illustration-3



(Source: <https://i.pinimg.com/474x/fe/9f/c0/fe9fc042f428db926df8664feb0b0acd--golden-age-pictures-of.jpg>)

Illustration-4



The **Bear Garden** (left) and the Bull Baiting arena (right) as depicted by Visscher's map of 1616. Image courtesy of the Folger Digital Image Collection

Source: (https://mapoflondon.uvic.ca/graphics/visscher_bear_garden.jpg)

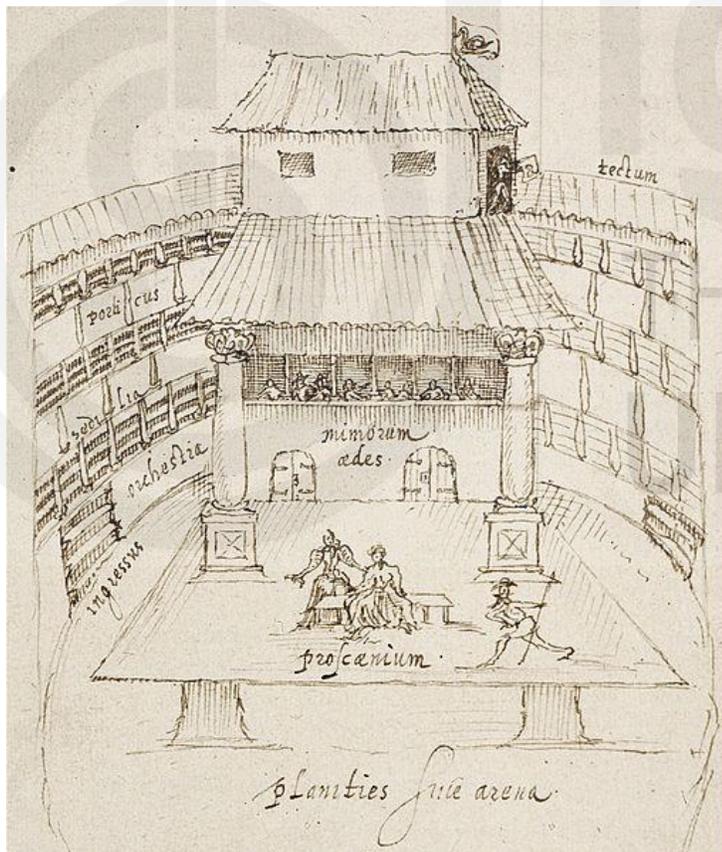
Theatre in England evolved significantly in the sixteenth century. Entertainment space in this period took the form of acrobatics and bear-baiting rings, from there it went to the round stage used by Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Watching bulls fighting, dogs baiting a bear, performances of acrobats and actors, all, took place and the one in inn yards and other informal structures. (See Illustrations 1, 2 and 3). Such a spectacle tells us how the audience stood close at hand and watched the performers. This interaction was direct, exciting and engaging. The people of Elizabethan England would visit the bear baiting rings and watch these shows with real blood and gore. This was a popular form of sport for the people. It is interesting to mark that the people also went to watch public executions. The structure of the inn yards was quite close to what we see in terms of the later stage developments. As Frye states:

Certainly, some of his early theatrical experience would have been with courtyards of inns, where the actors would set up their stage at one end and play to an audience collected on the yard and on the balconies. The permanent theatre buildings erected around Elizabethan London after 1576 preserved much of the feeling of these innyards, by their placing of stage, yard and galleries. (Frye No. 19). Plays were also performed at the Inns of Courts. These were “a combination of law schools, professional societies and gentlemen’s clubs” (no. 39 Frye, Roland Mushat. *Shakespeare’s Life and Times*. London: Faber & Faber, 1967).

Theatre in the Elizabethan period hinged on providing entertainment and a close interaction with the audience. The structure of the inn yard when transformed to the formal stage of Shakespeare’s time made space for the gentry and nobility as it did for the commoners who stood in the pit. Shakespeare’s formal theatrical association was with Lord Chamberlain’s Company. It was patronised by Henry Carey, The Lord Chamberlain, hence the name. The theatre was owned by a group of people and this included Shakespeare. Theatre was a popular form of entertainment and it also had a commercial side to it. The association of money with the world of theatre was important. There were tickets to be bought and sold, people invested in the theatre and also made profits. In this way theatres were rooted in the everyday life.

1.5.2 The Globe theatre

Illustration-5



The Swan Playhouse in London. It was sketched by the Dutch scholar Johannes de Witt in 1596. He noticed that the Swan was the largest theatre and had a capacity of 3000. The sketch is a copy de Witt’s sketch made by his friend Aernout van Buchell

(Source: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/5/51/Swan-theatre-johannes-de-witt-ms-842-f132r-1596.jpg/510px-Swan-theatre-johannes-de-witt-ms-842-f132r-1596.jpg>)

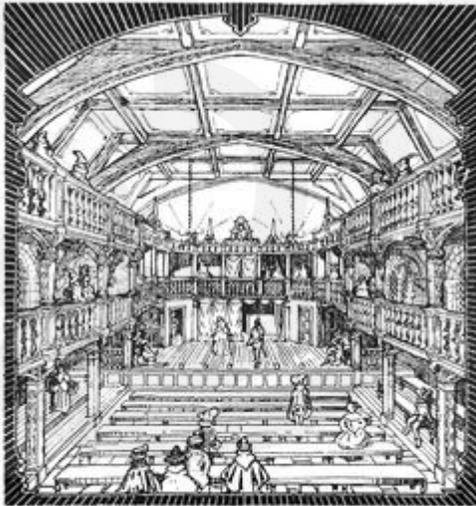
Illustration-6



Second Globe Theatre, detail from Hollar's *View of London*, 1647. Hollar sketched the building from life (see top) but only later assembled the drawings into this *View*; he mislabelled the images of The Globe and the nearby bear-baiting enclosure. Here the correct label has been restored. The small building to the left supplied food and ale-sellers

(Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/6/6f/Hollar_Long_View_detail.png/220px-Hollar_Long_View_detail.png)

Illustration-7



CONJECTURAL RECONSTRUCTION by G.Topham Forrest

Conjectural reconstruction of the second Blackfriars Theatre from contemporary documents.

(Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/1/1c/Blackfriars_theatre_conjectural_reconstruction_1921.png/250px-Blackfriars_theatre_conjectural_reconstruction_1921.png)

There were many theatres during the period. For instance one of the oldest was Red Lion theatre. Then there was the Theatre, Rose Theatre and Swan Theatre. In 1599 The Globe Theatre was built by Shakespeare and others. It continued till 1613 when it was burnt down. Based on the sketch of the Swan Theatre by the Dutch, Johannes de Witt, we get to know the structure of the stage in that period. The Swan Theatre could accommodate 3000 people. The stage space was surrounded by three tiers of galleries. To sit there one would have to pay extra money. The space in front of the stage was referred to as the pit and had the cheapest tickets. The “groundlings” could stand and watch the play for a nominal amount. There was no roof over that space and they had to brave weather conditions. But the people in the galleries had to pay more and were protected due to the roof. The gallery also had rooms for private

viewing called the *tarras*. As we know from the sketch of the Swan theatre, there was a part of the stage that extended into the audience space. This was called the apron stage. A part of this was covered. It provided protection to the actors from the weather and also space to designate parts such as the heaven or even keep some kind of equipment required in the play. There was a trapdoor to indicate hell. (See Illustrations 5 and 6)

The two main groups of performing companies were the Admiral's Men and Lord Chamberlain's Men. The former performed in the Rose and the latter in the Theatre. These were located in the areas that also housed the brothels. Later the Lord Chamberlain's Men performed in the Globe theatre. As King James I came to power as the King of England, the Lord Chamberlain's Men became the official group and were henceforth called King's Men. The private theatres such as the Blackfriars theatre was bought by Shakespeare and other partners in 1608. It catered to the elite and could seat only about 200-300 people. (See Illustration 7). It is interesting to therefore mark the use of the theatrical space for a presentation and discussion of issues related to the ways of the world of kings and nobility. The intervention in these spaces by the actors said a lot about the kind of change and unrest setting in society.

1.6 DRAMA AND CENSORSHIP IN ELIZABETHAN ENGLAND

Illustration - 8



Claes Visscher's view of London, 1616

(Source:https://cdn2.rsc.org.uk/sitefinity/images/miscellaneous/out_of_copyright_visscher_view_of_lond_on_1616_social-media_1440x1368.tmb-gal-670.jpg?sfvrsn=a5d65821_1)

Theatre, an act of performance has always been seen as a threatening force in society. In the context of Elizabethan England the relation between performance of plays and the monarchy was complex. On the one hand watching plays was a popular pastime for the ordinary people. On the other hand the plays made

references to the existing structures of power. This was noted by the monarchy. For instance the immense popularity of *Richard II* disturbed Queen Elizabeth. As William Lambarde records in “His Notes of a Conversation with Queen Elizabeth I about *Richard II*:

Her Majestie fell upon the reign of King Richard II, saying, “I am Richard II. Know ye not that?...He that will forget God, will also forget his benefactor; this tragedy was played 40 times in open streets and houses. (McDonald, Russ. *Shakespeare: An Introduction with Documents*. Boston: Bedford Books, 1996. 178)

The manifold ways in which theatre and society existed become clear. The gaze of censors was being directed towards the world of theatre and performance. For instance, the day before the uprising by the Earl of Essex a performance of *Richard II* was presented. Also as McDonald points out, “*Richard II*, for example, was originally printed, almost certainly for political reasons, without the section in act 4, scene 1 in which the king is actually deposed” (55). Numerous Acts and statutes were passed to control the kind of plays that were put up.

Spatially, the theatres were located outside the city in the space called the “liberties”. By their spatial dislocation from mainstream society, it became a space that contested the structures of power. Amongst many such Acts was that of the *Act of Common Council for the Regulation Of Theatrical performances in London* (December 6, 1574):

... for the safety and well ordering of the people there assembled, be it enacted by the authority of the Common Council that from henceforth, no play, comedy, tragedy, interlude nor public show shall be openly played or showed openly within the Liberties of the City wherein shall be uttered any words, examples, or doings of any unchastity, sedition nor such like unfit and uncomely matter upon pain of imprisonment by the space of fourteen days of all persons offending in any such open playing or showings, and five pounds for every such offense. (Pollard, Tanya. ed. *Shakespeare’s Theatre: A Sourcebook*. USA: Blackwell, 2004. 306)

The church represented a powerful space that framed the rules on which society rested and the theatre became an alternative space to contest those normative ideas. In 1597 the Privy Council passed an order against the “disorders” committed in the playhouses, the decree being that no play shall be performed in London city and the playhouses too shall be brought down. Clearly there was a tussle between playhouses and the authorities.

In this milieu there was an active discussion on theatrical performances. What then was the role and function of theatre in society? A staunch critic of theatre, Stephen Gosson wrote *The Schoole of Abuse* (1579). Gosson considered theatre to be immoral in its import and exhorted:

This have I set down of the abuses of poets, pipers, and players, which bring us to pleasure, sloth, sleep, sin, and without repentance to death and the devil...Let us but shut up our ears to poets, pipers and player; pull our feet back from resort to theaters, and turn away our eyes from beholding of vanity; the greatest storm of abuse will be overblown, and a fair path trodden to amendment of life. (Pollard 28)

Gosson suggested a movement away from theatre. Philip Stubbes in *Anatomy of Abuses* (1583) saw the performer as the devil’s partner. He was uncomfortable with the presentation of the bawdy in plays, especially the use of abuses. John Rainolds in *The Overthrow of Stage-Plays* (1599) condemned the performance of female roles by men. Henry Crosse in *Virtue’s Commonwealth* (1603) understood plays to be “scandalous and scurrilous”. The experience of performing and watching plays was subversive at many levels. Apart from the use of the bawdy, the performance of women’s roles by men disturbed certain critics as this challenged gender roles and was also seen as women’s association with the bawdy. Men cross-dressed as women and performed in ways seen as flouting the norms of social behavior. The fact that these were being watched by women themselves upset the social fabric and its guidelines of

prescriptive behaviour for women.

However watching plays had struck a chord with people in a manner that was not easy to separate. Hence, there were others like Thomas Lodge who wrote *A Reply to Stephen Gosson's School of Abuse, in Defence of Poetry, Music and Stage Plays* (1579) as a response to Gosson's virulent attack on theatres:

First therefore, if it be not tedious to Gosson to hearken to the learned, the reader shall perceive the antiquity of playmaking, the inventors of comedies, and therewithall the use and commodity of them. So that in the end I hope my labor shall be liked, and the learned will sooner conceive his folly. (Pollard 51)

Thomas Heywood's *An Apology for Actors* (1611) looked at "playing as an ornament of the city." These conflicting views indicate that one of the most popular forms of entertainment, rooted in society was seen by many as subversive. The debates and arguments around it continued. The Puritan influence and a conservativeness that sought to hold this free flow of ideas culminated in the shutting down of theatres in 1642.

Playwriting and watching disturbed the monarchy and this led to the passing of Acts and Decrees that tried to control and censor plays. The actor for all his commercial profit-making was equated with vagabonds. In 1572, the *Act For The Punishment Of Vagabonds, And For The Relief Of The Poor And Impotent* was passed and brought back in 1604. The Act stated that "fencers, bear-wards, common players of interludes, and minstrels wandering abroad" were to be "adjudged, and deemed as rogues, and vagabonds" and punished accordingly. In another act, *An Act To Restrain Abuses Of Players*, (1606) stated that if any person committed profanity against God or his name he shall have to pay ten pounds for every such offense.

Theatres were also the first to be shut down due to the repeated onset of plague in England. John Stow in *Survey of London* records that "between December 1592 and the following December, 11,000 people in London out of approximately 200,000 died owing to the plague" (Baker, William. *William Shakespeare*. London: Continuum, 2009. 15). Peter Thomson too points out in "Playhouses and Players in the time of Shakespeare" that, "It became an established custom to order the closing of the London theatres when registered deaths reached forty in any one week." Germaine Greer too corroborates this idea:

The playhouses were known to be unhealthy places, which is why they were the first institutions to be closed down in times of plague; they were also the only places where also the denizens of London, from the meanest pickpocket to the grandest functionary, could foregather and experience their membership of a community. Even the largest churches did not afford the same spectacular possibilities, for the pulpit was raised above the congregation who stood all on one plane. In the theatre the audience could see itself as a tapestry of faces, surging below in the pit and rising on the tiers around the wooden walls, with the actor on his promontory, the projecting stage, at their mercy. (Greer, Germaine. *Shakespeare: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford, 1986. 24)

Theatres, play-going and performance was central to Elizabethan life. Watching a performance was a social act binding the people and the world of stage in complex ways. An intermingling of different social groups, of men and women had a bearing on the plays written, performed and discussed.

1.7 DATE OF THE PLAY

William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is believed to have been written around 1606. This was the period after the accession of King James I to the English throne. He was King James VI of Scotland and became the first Scottish king to become the monarch of England. His rise was not without opposition and as a result rebellion against the king followed. One such opposition was the failed rebellion of the Gunpowder Plot. This plot points towards the murky aspects that surrounded monarchy in those days. *Macbeth* captures the tensions and contradictions that belong to the Jacobean age.

Though there is no clear evidence regarding the dating of the play, scholars pitch for a date between 1599 and 1606. This is based on William Warner's poem *A Continuance of Albion's England* (1586) that mentions *Makbeth* as:

One *Makebeth*, who had traitorously his sometimes Souereigne slaine,
And like a Monster not a Man vsurpt in *Scotland* raigne

Some years later, in 1605 a Latin playlet, Dr. Gwin's *Tres Sibyllae* was written and performed for King James in Oxford on August 27, 1605. The title translated as "Three Sibyls" praised the King and recognised his royal connection to Banquo and established him as King of England and Scotland (Nostbakken 29). The greetings of the three sibyls to King James in *Tres Sibyllae* are as follows: "Hail thou who rulest Scotland/Hail thou who rulest England/Hail thou who rulest Ireland/Hail thou to whom France gives titles whilst the others give lands/Hail thou whom Britain, now united though formerly divided, cherishes/Hail thou supreme British, Irish, Gallic Monarch" (Nostbakken, Faith. *Understanding Macbeth: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources and Historical Documents*. London: The Greenwood P, 1997. 30). These are echoed in the witches' predictions to Macbeth in Shakespeare's play.

The performance of the play was confirmed in an eye-witness account, by the English astrologist Simon Forman of the play's public performance. Forman records in *Book of Plaies* how the play was performed on April 20, 1611 at the Globe. He states:

In Mackbeth at the Glob, 1610, the 20 of April [Sat], there was to be obserued, firste, how Mackbeth and Bancko, 2 noble men of Scotland, Ridinge thorowe a wood, the[r] stooede before them 3 women feiries or Nimphes, And saluted Mackbeth, saying 3 tymes vnto him, haille Mackbeth, King of Codon; (Bloom, Harold. Ed. *Bloom's Shakespeare Through the Ages: Macbeth*. New York, Infobase P, 2008. 44)

Forman's record of the play is primarily a summary and it differs from the Folio account of the play in 1623. But it pins the play to a plausible date.

Keeping in mind Warner's poem and Forman's account of the performance most take 1606 to be the year in which it was written. There is evidence that the play was also performed at the King's court. As Nostbakken states, "The Scottish historical setting, the Banquo legend, the inclusion of witches, and the debate about kinship all reflect personal interests of King James, indicating that Shakespeare may have had a court performance in mind" (121).

1.8 SOURCES OF *MACBETH*

This section will provide a brief overview of the source texts used by Shakespeare for *Macbeth*. A brief look at different historical accounts that find reference in the play provides a layered complexity to the play. It functions dialectically with texts that suggest a formative base to the Shakespearean text. These interact with other documents and texts of the world of the play. We also read it in the twenty-first century context and the stance creates another level of interpretation interacting both with the formative texts and the play, text.

Amongst the possible sources, it is believed that *Macbeth* is based on Raphael Holinshed's *The Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1587). Other historical documents that work their way into the play are John Major's *A History of Greater Britain* (1521) and George Buchanan's *History of Scotland* (1582). (See Illustration-9). Most researchers have pointed out that Shakespeare relied primarily on Holinshed's *Chronicles* but that he was possibly aware of other historical accounts too. We can, therefore, state that the primary source of *Macbeth* was Holinshed's *Chronicles*.

Illustration-9



The first edition of Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotlande and Irelande*, printed in 1577. (Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/b/bd/1577_printing_of_Holinshed%27s_Chronicles.jpg/220px-1577_printing_of_Holinshed%27s_Chronicles.jpg)

Historically, Macbeth was the eighty-fifth king of Scotland who ruled from 1040 to 1057 C.E. He killed his predecessor, King Duncan and was succeeded by the latter's son, Malcolm III. In the sixteenth century, the ascent of the Scottish king to the English throne prompted interest in the dynamic between the two nations. The reconstruction of Macbeth in historical documents places him at the cross-section of the cultural and political history of the two countries as they are conjoined in the rule of King James I. Let us examine the depiction of Macbeth in the possible sources chronologically. John Major's historical account of "Greater Britain", presents Macbeth as follows:

This Duncan was secretly put to death by the faction which had till then been in opposition. He was mortally wounded by one Macbeth at Lochgowane, and was then carried to Elgin, where he died...Machabeus, or Macbeth as some speak it, when Duncan had been thus betrayed to his end, assumed the sceptre of sovereignty, usurper fashion, to himself, and would have pursued the sons of dead Duncan to their destruction. (Carroll, William C. *Macbeth: Texts and Contexts*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999.126)

The above extract from Major's *A History of Greater Britain* (1521) draws attention to two antagonistic factions. One is of Duncan, or ruler by inheritance and the other is Macbeth or the usurper. Is monarchy a matter of inheritance or can the king be displaced by deception and murder? The "usurper" as new king is certainly Machiavellian and necessitates interpretation. Interestingly, Major's *History* makes no mention of either Lady Macbeth or the witches.

George Buchanan's *History of Scotland* (1582), describes Macbeth as a man of "sharp wit, and of a very

lofty spirit; and, if moderation had accompanied it, he had been worthy of a command, though an eminent one” (Carroll, William C. *Macbeth: Texts and Contexts*. New York: Bedfor/St. Martin’s, 1999. 128). He is presented as brave and one capable of dealing with rebels in a manner that is called “severe”—“But, in punishing offenders, he was so severe, that having no respect to the laws, he seemed soon likely to degenerate into cruelty” (128). His severity is evidenced by his cutting off of Macduald’s head. However, Duncan is seen by Macbeth as the slothful cousin. Macbeth meets the witches in a dream. They salute him as Thane of Angus, Thane of Murray and finally king of Scotland. He is also “spurred on” by his wife who “was privy to all his counsels” (130). Buchanan’s account mentions seventeen years of Macbeth’s rule in which ten years were peaceful as he punished the “free-booters or thieves, who had taken courage from the lenity of Duncan...The public peace being thus restored, he applied his mind to make laws” (Carroll 131). However, as his kingly ascent was “obtained by violence” he became insecure and his anxieties egg him on to greater violence as he kills Banquo. He is succeeded by Malcolm III as the eighty-sixth king.

The primary source of *Macbeth* was Holinshed’s *Chronicles* that relied on John Bellenden’s Scottish translation of Hector Boece’s Latin history. Holinshed’s *Chronicles* presents Duncan and Macbeth as born to the two daughters of Malcolm; Duncan to Beatrice and Macbeth to Doda. The *Chronicles* describes Macbeth as a “valiant gentleman, and one that if he had not been somewhat cruel of nature, might have been thought most worthy the government of a realm” (Carroll, William C. *Macbeth: Texts and Contexts*. New York: Bedfor/St. Martin’s, 1999. 135). On the other hand Duncan has been described as of a very mild temperament, “soft and gentle of nature”. Close to Buchanan’s account that mentions the ten years of Macbeth’s rule is Holinshed’s that describes Duncan’s reign as “quiet and peaceable, without any notable trouble; but after it was perceived how negligent he was in punishing offenders, many misruled persons took occasion thereof to trouble the peace and quiet state of the commonwealth, by seditious commotions which first had their beginning in this wise” (Carroll 135). This is reversed when Macbeth becomes King as he, “set his whole intention to maintain justice, and to punish all enormities and abuses” (Carroll 144). He is described as the “sure defense and buckler” of the innocent people. Holinshed accounts ten peaceful years of a reign of seventeen years as the latter part of Macbeth’s rule is a period of violence and anarchy. This difference in the governance of the two kings or the period of Macbeth’s rule is glossed over by Shakespeare.

In Holinshed’s version (as also in Buchanan), the Stuart line descends from Banquo in keeping with the witches’ prediction. Macdonwald is the rebel who managed to persuade people to join him. From Ireland came the “kerns and gallowglasses” in the hope of spoil (Carroll 137). Macbeth’s fight against Macdonwald is a kind of rebellion itself. He contradicts Duncan, accusing him of “slackness” and demands that he and Banquo be allowed to fight Macdonwald. However, unlike the play in which Macbeth ‘unseams’ the enemy from the navel to the chops, in the *Chronicles*, Macdonwald first kills his wife and children and then himself; his head is sent to Duncan and the body is then put up on the staves by Macbeth—“Macbeth entering into the castle by the gates, as then set open, found the carcass of Macdonwald lying dead there amongst the residue of the slain bodies, which when he beheld, remitting no piece of his cruel nature with that pitiful sight, he caused the head to be cut-off, and set upon a pole’s end, and so sent it as a present to the King who as then lay at Bertha” (Carroll 137). Meanwhile, in the fight against the Danes, Duncan was losing face. The Scots mixed the juice of mekilwoort berries with poison and sent it with victuals to the enemy; after this Macbeth and Banquo killed them all. In this historical version Macbeth and Banquo encounter the witches—“It fortun’d as Macbeth and Banquo journeyed towards Forres, where the King then lay...when suddenly in the midst of a laund, there met them three women in strange and wild apparel, resembling creatures of elder world...” One by one, they refer to him as “Thane of Glamis”, “Thane of Cawdor” and finally “King of Scotland” (142). When asked by Banquo they reveal his fate as better because Macbeth “shall reign in deed, but with an unlucky end; neither shall he leave any issue behind...” (Carroll 142). There is also mention of Lady Macbeth as one who was “ambitious, burning in unquenchable desire to bear the name of a queen” and compelled Macbeth to kill Duncan. Here too Macbeth rules for ten years but gradually his insecurity caused him to “put his nobles to death”.

In converting the available historical material into a text to be performed on stage, Shakespeare uses the sources meaningfully. At a time when the matter of succession and sovereignty had gripped the minds of the people, a play such as *Macbeth* would have functioned in complex ways to problematise these issues. The play negotiates between a new King in England, his Scottish connection, the legacy of the Queen and the percolation of these factors to the imagination of the people. The rebellions against the monarch such as the Gunpowder Plot resonate in the play along with the established claims of inheritance and power. A play written and performed in the early years of the reign of King James I would certainly have been read, watched and understood on these counts.

Set in Scottish terrain, *Macbeth* makes explicit, divergent and conflicting voices in the form of Macbeth's aspirations for the kingly crown as against the projected legitimate claims of Malcolm through the system of primogeniture. In doing so, the play problematizes the insecurities and tentativeness brewing amongst the people during James' rule. The contradictions of King James' rule soon transform into the tumult of the reign of Charles I. The events of the 1640s challenged the lineal descent of monarchs. In writing *Macbeth* Shakespeare presents a complex amalgam of issues that are tentative and lasting at the same time.

1.9 LET US SUM UP

This chapter introduced you to the England of the sixteenth century and particularly the humanist thought. It acquainted you with monarchical debates in the form of Machiavellian strategy and King James' *Basilikon Doron* with help from this unit. You will be able to visualise the social world of London and its theatre going audience. A brief history of the stage with special reference to the Globe theatre draws attention to the experience of watching a play in the Elizabethan times. The section on drama and censorship reveals how many a feather were ruffled by the plays with reference to the monarchical issues of the time. Finally you would have understood the historical rootedness of the play in terms of the different sources that Shakespeare was familiar with and thus relied on for the subject of his play.

1.10 GLOSSARY

Baiting:

In this case to provoke the bear

Copernicus:

He challenged the Ptolemaic system in the sixteenth century by proposing the heliocentric model with the sun at the centre and the earth and other planets moving around it.

Elizabethan Settlement:

When Elizabeth became the queen of England she had to confront many problems, one of them being the Catholic response to her Protestant leanings. She finally proposed the Elizabethan settlement and the Anglican faith that allowed people to practice their Catholic belief by accepting the Queen as sovereign.

Humanism:

A term associated with the Renaissance. A revival of classical learning shifted the focus on to the human and its refinement.

Protestant:

It is a form of Christianity. People who were dissatisfied with the Catholic tenets of Christianity, especially papal supremacy constituted the Protestant group.

Ptolmey:

An astronomer who in 150 AD proposed the geocentric model of the system—earth at the centre and all other planets going around it.

Renaissance:

The French word literally means awakening. It refers to a movement that started in the fourteenth century in Italy, gained prominence in the fifteenth century and spread to other parts of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth century.

Spanish Armada:

It was a fleet of ships that invaded England in 1588

1.11 QUESTIONS

1. Write a note on Renaissance and humanist thought.
2. Describe the world of drama in the sixteenth century.
3. Write a note on the issue of censorship in theatres in the sixteenth century.
4. Discuss the issue of the date assigned to the writing of *Macbeth*.
5. What are the different sources on which Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is based? Explain.
6. Write a note on the *Chronicles* as the primary source to *Macbeth*.
7. Study *Macbeth*'s character as an instance of Machiavellian strategy.

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