

Political Perspective of 'Macbeth'¹

Dr. Raad Hameed Kambash

Assistant Professor, Almansour University College, Iraq

ABSTRACT

Abundant research has been conducted on all works of Shakespeare, yet, researchers continue to delve deeper into his writings and one is astonished to realize that one can still find unexplored areas that help to reveal more about the plays and the playwright. This study is one such accidental hit upon something in the famous play 'Macbeth' that enables a better understanding of the characters as well as a worthy search into the play's association with history, further enabling a political perspective of the play. The researcher has touched upon the religious aspect as well, and the supernatural beliefs of those times. Together, the entire comprehensive view gives a sense of completion and satisfaction of the reading of the play.

Keywords: *religious; political; historical; plot; conspiracy; murder*

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

The human brain can soar to mighty heights of imagination, as is evident in the art and creative writings of literature hitherto, especially when we think of legendary writers like William Shakespeare. At the same time, it must be kept in mind that no matter how deviant the brain can think, the shoots of imagination are rooted in reality. A work of art is triggered, a theme or an idea is triggered by some experience of the creator. Characters in fiction or drama are inspired by someone within the experience of the writer. The writer's skill lies in combining incidents, blending character-traits and arranging or organising a piece of writing comprehensively so that the final presentation appears to be an original creation. Yet, it holds true as per the old saying, that truth is stranger than fiction.

Every notable piece of writing can offer a good exercise, to seek its roots in reality; it will not always be a futile attempt. If the roots are traced, it will only help in understanding the literature work in a better way and provide an opportunity to look at it from various new perspectives. Even if any resemblance to reality is missed, the work will always remain a worthy piece of literature and continue to entertain and inform readers. However, there is no harm in tracing sources of inspiration or identifying resemblances to reality, or searching for different perspectives.

It is a fact that Shakespeare borrowed plots from history and constructed his plays. Hence, many of his plays can be described as historical. At times, he combines facts with fiction in order to bring forth some realities about human life and nature. We often come across a resemblance between some historical characters and the characters in his plays. We find this kind of resemblance between King James I and the protagonist in his play 'Macbeth'. Although there are differences in the events, there is surely a connection which ensures that the play 'Macbeth' can be seen from a political perspective. This paper intends to examine the play from a political perspective and arrive at some valuable conclusions.

If the play 'Macbeth' is read as a work of art without any reference to history or any other issue, it offers a complete satisfaction about plot, characters and all elements of drama. Yet, the conditions in which it was staged by Shakespeare compel readers to associate it with the Gunpowder plot. In order to understand the relationship between the two, it is necessary to summarize briefly the tenets of the Gunpowder plot. The latter was a true historical incident; hence, it follows that if the plot resembles a historical incident, the characters involved in the plot must resemble one or other of the characters in the play.

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Background of the Play

Exhaustive research has been conducted on all aspects of all works of Shakespeare. There seems to be nothing left for researchers to explore. Yet, the more one delves into his works, the more one can find and reveal. The reason could be the immense potential of Shakespeare's treasure that he has left behind, or it could be the unending urge to explore deep, the undying curiosity of the human mind. Occasionally some researcher hits upon something new, perhaps a new angle or perspective, a new theory that can be applied for investigation or an unidentified resemblance to reality. Someone may also discover the writer's source of inspiration or try to imagine his/her aims or objectives in setting a situation or creating a character. Such attempts in research are very fruitful and help to add value to the literary works. Literature reflects society directly or indirectly. Although a work of literature can be entirely fictitious, the imagination is based upon life experiences. The closest forms that approach reality are biographies and historical writings. Shakespeare often borrowed themes from real history, sometimes to highlight certain circumstances and sometimes, as a general background for whatever observations about human life he wished to convey. Sometimes, it was a combination of both.

This article explores how the contemporary political background and the plot in the play 'Macbeth' bring forth certain facts about human nature. The political angle is extended to a psychological angle. If direct criticism of a real incident is not possible, the objective can be achieved through literature. A real historical event provides an opportunity to touch upon several aspects of human nature, life, social and political aspects, and related issues. The article has significant relevance from all these angles and a literary, scholarly angle as well.

This article also attempts to look at the famous tragedy penned by Shakespeare from a different perspective hitherto untapped. The article focusses mainly on two aspects:

1. Is the play 'Macbeth' related to any real historical incident?
2. Do any of the characters in the play resemble historical figures?

The Gunpowder plot was designed to blow up the parliamentary building and kill King James -1 who did not show tolerance towards Catholics. The conspirators had hidden tons of gunpowder in the basement of the parliament building but it was discovered and the plot failed. The conspirators were arrested and brutally hanged and quartered. The incident took place in 1605. The Gunpowder plot was planned for religious purposes. It was triggered and executed by staunch Catholics. Following the Gunpowder plot, new laws were framed in England, offering the Catholics the right to vote and cancellation of some repressive restrictions. On the other hand, King Duncan was the victim in Macbeth, who was killed by Macbeth for high ambition to gain the throne. The plan was successful and led to a series of murders. It created a wave of fear in many a mind for varying reasons. Finally, justice was established when the throne was adorned by rightful heirs as pre-destined. The conspirators met with the death they deserved. Macbeth's plot was triggered by the prophecy of witches who boosted his ambition. While tracing the events in history and in the play, a simultaneous analogy will be drawn between King James-1 and King Duncan. It is possible to perceive a work of fiction like 'Macbeth' from a political angle.

Aims and Objectives

The aim of this research is to consider the play 'Macbeth' by William Shakespeare from a different perspective. Considering the political situation in which the play was written, it can be viewed from a political angle.

Hypothesis

By drawing a parallel between the plot and real historical events and characters with real people, it is possible to bring forth some truths and facts about human life and nature.

Method

A library method is used in this research. A thorough reading of Macbeth, critical texts and articles, will be followed by an analysis of the play, its plot and characters in the light of real historical events.

SECTION 2: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The Gunpowder Plot

The Gunpowder Plot of 1605 is also known as the Gunpowder Treason Plot or the Jesuit Treason. Around 1540, the British society was dominated by the new Protestant church and the Catholics had to struggle for their religion. Opposition resulted in harsh punishments like imprisonment or execution. The situation became intense during the reign of King James-1 and since he did not take any steps to improve it, several plots were designed to put an end to his rule. One such plot was the Gunpowder Plot. The plot was led by Catesby and the plan was to kill James-1. Barrels of gunpowder were procured in order to blow up the parliament building but it was discovered and the plan failed. Shakespeare was influenced by the event and he used it in his play 'Macbeth', along with the previous Gowry Plot. Certain incidents and characters in the play can be traced to the Gunpowder Plot and historical characters. It leads to a possibility of comparing reality with fiction and a comparison between the aftermaths of the incidents.

Although the Gunpowder Plot failed, it was enough to open the eyes of those who did wrong to others in the name of religion. The reformation of laws regarding Catholics that followed the incident are enough proof.

Shakespeare and History

Shakespeare wrote ten history plays starting from the reign of King John to Henry VIII. Although his historic plays have a historic base, they are works of imagination and his sole purpose was to entertain the public. For example, Shakespeare chose to present King Henry V as a perfect king in view of furthering certain themes which he wanted to present through the play. Shakespeare's version of the characters are so impressive that most people remember them more than the real characters as they existed. Shakespeare's historical plays give an insight into political processes of medieval times and at the same time, afford a glimpse of human beings at all levels of society.

The Story of Macbeth

Macbeth was a soldier in King Duncan's army. He happened to come across three witches who prophesied that he would be the king. Macbeth's ambition was triggered by the witches and strengthened by his wife Lady Macbeth. The first prophecy was that Macbeth would be the Thane of Cawdor. It turns out to be true so Macbeth believes that the other prophecies would also come true. Macbeth was happy with his position. When Duncan nominated his son as the heir, Macbeth became apprehensive and then began a series of murders starting with Duncan, followed by the guards and MacDuff who were direct witnesses of the murder. Macbeth is appointed the King of Scotland as per the prophecy. The witches had also predicted that the future kings would be the descendants of Banquo and not Macbeth. So, he kills Banquo, but his son escapes. Macbeth is haunted by Banquo's ghost. Lady Macbeth loses her mental balance and is reduced to a miserable state. Confronted by Malcolm's army, Macbeth struggles but dies in the end. Lady Macbeth also dies. Shakespeare's support for properly-constituted monarchs – even if they are weak at the job of government – indicates a support for stability as well as for kingship (Martin Stephen, Philip Franks, 1984, p. 32).

Just as one lie leads to a succession of lies, one murder leads to a series of murders. All bad deeds take their toll. Getting Duncan out of the way was not enough for Macbeth to retain the throne. Once he became the King of Scotland, he experienced a sense of insecurity. To secure his position, he had to kill some more people. He killed the chamberlains and put the blame on them. He had to pretend innocence. Cheating, lies, bribery followed one after the other. He had to pay the murderers. He killed Banquo. He wanted to kill Macduff who escapes but he succeeds in killing Macduff's wife and children. Before the French Revolution, "kings for centuries were killed in corners, the murders hushed up, the murderers unthanked, neglected, condemned" (Walzer 1973: 620). The following words of Ross to his wife show his perspective of the situation when Macduff has left Scotland abruptly, without confiding in his wife.

Ross: *But cruel are the times, when we are traitors
And do not know ourselves, when we hold rumour
From what we fear, yet know not what we fear,
But float upon a wild and violent sea...*

The wife's observations tell us more about the loss of reason and fear:

Lady Macduff:

*All is the fear and nothing is the love;
As little is the wisdom, where the flight
So runs against all reason.*

Macbeth visits the witches too out of the sense of insecurity. They fill his head with other misleading notions, adding to the crimes of Macbeth.

One wonders whether ambition is stronger in Lady Macbeth or Macbeth. She commits suicide driven mad by intense sense of guilt. Duncan is also killed in a battle fought against him by an army raised by Macduff and his comrades for the very purpose. Bare facts in the story are highlighted as evidence of the consequences of greed and ambition. One factor that must not be missed is the fear rampant after Duncan's murder. The resulting violence urges these words from Macduff:

Macduff: *Bleed, bleed, poor country!
Great tyranny!*

Almost every significant character had become the victim of fear. Malcolm and Macduff had sensed it early and fled. Banquo also feared death. Even Macbeth and Lady Macbeth were burdened by fear although they had set it off. The killing of Duncan multiplied the fear and insecurity which obsessed him day and night. Lady Macbeth's condition was far more miserable. She was almost on the verge of madness. Both showed acts of loss of the sense of reality at times.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In the article titled "Macbeth's Political Imagination: "The Struggle for Kingship in Macbeth" by Abdul Mutaleb et al (2021), the writers look upon ambition as a sin. According to them, regicide is observed in the play. Usurping someone leads to death and destruction. The fair rule of Duncan brought happiness to Scotland. The contrast between the two is deliberate as depicted by Shakespeare. The article talks about the brutal nature of struggle for monarchy. When one considers the divine right to kingship, the issue is both religious and political. It was believed that God appoints a king and not any human. Macbeth's ambition is considered as a flaw and the writers consider this to be a tragedy of ambition. But Macbeth's ambition is illegal. That is why it leads to chaos and destruction. Macbeth is so obsessed by the ambition planted by the witches that although Duncan is his guest, he commits the murder. His thoughts at that moment are evident in the following lines:

He's here in double trust; First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,

Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,

Who should against his murderer shut the door,

Not bear the knife myself. (1.7.12-16)

Macbeth's crime is intense: first because any killing is a crime and secondly because he kills a king, who is God's choice. The writers opine that a certain action of Macbeth may be unintentional or forced by circumstances, as he knew that he was doing wrong. The article concludes that Duncan remains the ideal king.

The main argument in Edward Djordjevic's article titled "Conjuring Legitimacy: Shakespeare's Macbeth as contemporary English Politics" (2020), is that James is indeed the legitimate king but he questions the grounds of that legitimacy. In those times, people believed in magic and there was some connection between witchcraft and monarchy in the preceding century. British monarchs made deliberate efforts to control witchcraft. Monarchs carried out witch hunts in England, especially in Scotland. We find a similar situation in Shakespeare's play. However, the

writer reemphasizes that witches never existed, hence, any scholarly attempt to study them is a futile effort. The article touched upon both – legitimacy and witch craft. Perhaps, Shakespeare wrote ‘Macbeth’ to draw the favours of King James I in the aftermath of the failure of the Gunpowder Plot. From ACT IV onwards, the play confirmed the ideology of legitimacy as lineage. In the play as in reality, one system of rule is replaced by another. Macbeth is abruptly presented as the king – it is not mentioned who appointed him and when. Power changed hands. James was new and a foreign king. The play is undoubtedly about contemporary politics in England.

Richard van Oort (2018) has given a very different picture of Macbeth in his article titled “Violence and Politics in Shakespeare’s Macbeth and Kurosawa’s Throne of Blood”. He argues that Macbeth was a brave warrior. Most critics view Macbeth as an ambitious tyrant. However, they fail to see the deeper irony. “... it is unsurprising that a heroic battlefield commander such as Macbeth would be simultaneously haunted by a desire for the throne. What else has he been trained for? The very things that make him a supreme defender of his king (desire, envy, fearlessness, predatory violence) make him an obvious candidate to replace him” (Richard van Oort, 2018, p 99). The question of a successor is raised when the king dies. Duncan was aware of this, so he declares his son Malcolm as his heir. Malcolm is weak and feeble but preferable to Macbeth, who was valiant and fierce. Macbeth seizes the opportunity, prompted by the witches, and encouraged by his wife. He takes the throne easily, without any opposition. The writer states that one cannot blame Macbeth of violence in a world where violence was the norm. If he would not have killed Duncan, someone else would have done it and become the king.

SECTION 3: ANALYSIS

Macbeth and the King

When a king heads any nation, the subjects generally accept the king without questioning. Especially in days when people believed in the divine scheme, believed that it is God’s will. The same was true about King James-1 and King Duncan. As long as things go on smoothly, nobody thinks of going against the King. Even if there is some degree of oppression from the side of the monarch, there is also a degree of tolerance from the side of the subjects. King James-1 was brought up as a Protestant although his mother was a Catholic. However, when he crossed the limits of tolerance there was bound to be opposition. Plotting and conspiracy against oppressive kings is common in the history of monarchs. James met with the same fate. The Gunpowder plot was an attempt to put an end to his tyranny and injustice towards the Catholics. At the same time, there is bound to be someone, who believes in humanity, who does not approve of massacre on a large scale, particularly, when several of them are innocent victims. Some unknown being of this nature revealed the plot through a letter, warning the parliamentarians and saving the would-be victims. It is a shame that religion should be the cause of such conspiracies of violence and murder. Each one follows the religion of his choice and must be given the right to do so. It is not a question of any religion being right or wrong or good or otherwise. No religion preaches violence or inhumanity.

It can be concluded from this political incident that the public will not tolerate injustice even under the name of religion beyond a certain extent. Kings may be rulers but they must act within limits; they do not have any right to exploit those who are at a disadvantage. Secondly, freedom must be given in religion and faith. Religion is something that cannot and should not be imposed on anyone. A King who acts without discretion in these matters must be prepared for opposition which can go to any extent. A King is responsible for the safety and well-being of his subjects. If his wisdom fails to instruct him, the consequences can cause thousands of innocent people to lose their lives.

Now let us switch to the play ‘Macbeth’ by William Shakespeare. In this play, it is ambition that prompts Macbeth to kill King Duncan. Unlike James, there was nothing to complain about King Duncan. People were happy and satisfied with him. He commanded the respect and honour of his subjects. He was just and kind. However, a reading of the play casts light on some aspects of politics which have been observed throughout history and hold good even today.

Macbeth was happy with his position. Being appointed the Thane of Cawdor was an additional honour. Had he not met the witches; he would have been overjoyed. However, the prophecy of the witches starts the fire of ambition in his breast, leading him to do deeds that even he did not imagine he would ever commit. When the first prophecy came true and he was declared Thane of Cawdor, he was sure that the next one that he would be king would come true as easily. Bloated with ambition, he is blinded to all else. When he reveals the prophecy of the witches to Lady Macbeth, she was able to convince him to murder Duncan. He began to feel insecure about rising to power when Duncan announced that his son Malcolm would be the king after his death. This shows us that ambition kills sense, that it eases the conditioning of minds and it works against reason.

Legitimacy

Macbeth killed Duncan and became the king. He was not the legal heir. It was believed in those times that a king is chosen by God. Duncan was God's choice and his rightful heir was his son Malcolm. After Macbeth's death, Malcolm became the king. Shakespeare perhaps wanted to show that if human beings meddle with God's plan, they can never succeed and would be destined to a miserable end. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth who desired for the impossible met with a tragic end. Lady Macbeth was so shaken mentally that she was on the verge of madness. The couple could not enjoy the state of power for long. After getting Kingship, Macbeth feared danger from other rivals especially from Banquo because the witches had said that not he but his would succeed the throne. Perhaps, Banquo's descendants could be God's choice. But Macbeth killed Banquo in order to secure his position. No doubt he was brave, but he was a warrior and a good one and would have continued to be so. If one tries to usurp someone else's rightful position, one cannot match up with the same position with equal capacities. One can do only what one is made for. Macbeth was made to be a good warrior and not a good king.

Magic and witchcraft

England, particularly Scotland was rampant with ideas of magic and witchcraft and believed that it could work wonders, change destinies and shower luck through its practices. Witch hunting was common among monarchs in order to add to their powers. It was natural for Macbeth to believe the prophecies of the witches especially after the first prophecy came true and he was appointed thane of Cawdor. If this was possible immediately after meeting the witches, why not the kingship? He is so driven by the witches that he forgets that Duncan has made him the thane of Cawdor and not the witches. He suddenly felt that kingship was within easy reach although before he met the witches, he had not a single thought about it. He perceived a murder as something easy, something that he must accomplish, something that he was meant to do, all because of the witches. Did Shakespeare want to show that belief in the supernatural can change the normal order, disturb it and give rise to violence and treachery? In the circumstances that followed Macbeth becoming the king, nobody could be trusted. The witches could have been Macbeth's hallucination. Perhaps, hallucinations are the result of deep desires. The desires are converted into strong ambitions and translated into villainous acts. "Workings of fate and destiny are seen most obviously in relation to the witches, but are also present in the characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. However, the way in which fate and evil are interlinked is much more amorphous. While the deeds committed by these characters are evil, the destiny that compels them is neither evil nor good; it simply exists" (Spencer M, 2017, p 1).

In real politics, there may not be witches but witch like characters, as opined by Greenblatt: "the same set of events might have occurred anyway, impelled entirely by the pressure of Macbeth's violent ambition and his wife's psychological manipulation" (1994, p 21). Lady Macbeth seems to take destiny in her own hands and construct her own evil end.

Thus, we see that a play is a play. A playwright can put in black and white some ideas that he has in mind. He may hint at some others or imply through actions and dialogue. A playwright's brain may be crowded with themes and ideas. It is for readers to delve deep and unravel the multiple layers to understand the depth of a piece of literature. A great writer like Shakespeare can write a play with some definite intention and simultaneously hint at several related issues woven finely into the plot. A play can be looked at from several perspectives and each time, it will reveal something new. The charm lies in the multiplicity.

CONCLUSION

If we look at real history or a play based on history, we can conclude certain facts not only about history but ultimately about human race and life. The play shows that usurping someone's position can never end up in anybody's good. The victims suffer and so do the usurpers. The consequences are nationwide, as observed by Malcolm:

Malcolm: *I think our country sinks beneath the yoke;
It weeps, it bleeds; and each new day a gash
Is added to her wounds...*

The play points to the consequences of ambition for power. This is true about politics. Politics can never be free from ambition, jealousy and desire for power. Those who cherish them can go to any extent to achieve them and use all kinds of means, fair or foul. They seem to lose all sense of reason and do not hesitate to revert to violence and murder

and cruel deeds of all dimensions. Often, innocent lives are lost in the game of power. The witches do not directly tell Macbeth to kill Duncan. They just plant an ambition in his mind and he does the rest by taking responsibility for his own actions. Macbeth indulges in the thought planted by the witches but Banquo rejects it. The impact differs from character to character when faced by temptations. Macbeth has a lust for power unlike Banquo, which hastens his tragic end. A meeting with the witches changed the path of Macbeth's life and he changed as a human being.

It can be said that character traits are inherent but sometimes, they need an external trigger to be activated, as happens in the case of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. In the latter, cruelty can be observed as an inborn trait. The ambition triggered by the witches gives her opportunities to exercise it.

Although the victims of the two plots, namely Duncan and King James-1 are analogous, the purpose in murdering them was different; King James-1 was himself responsible for drawing the wrath of the Catholics while Duncan became the victim of another's desire for ambition. Both characters were kings with ultimate power of the nation in their hands. The consequences of the plots in both cases affected the whole nation, changed the history of the land and had far reaching consequences. Both plots led to villainous acts, destruction, violence and bloodshed. The concluding words of Macduff are apt to end the discussion:

Macduff:

*Boundless intemperance
In nature is a tyranny; it hath been
The untimely emptying of the happy throne
And fall of many kings.*

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