

Manus

THEMES OF SHAKESPEARE MACBETH

PRESENTER

Welcome to Stratford on Avon, the home town of William Shakespeare. It was in this small market town that Shakespeare was born and it was here that he retired at the end of his career, to die, on St George's Day, a day, which was coincidentally his own birthday.

As you might expect, Stratford is now at the very centre of what you might call, the "Shakespeare Industry". The Royal Shakespeare Company has its headquarters here, the world renowned Shakespeare Centre is custodian of countless irreplaceable Shakespearean documents and the Shakespeare Institute is one of the leading centres for the study of Shakespeare, in the world.

We shall be drawing upon the resources of all three of those institutions to bring you what we hope will be, a useful and valuable insight into the work of the man who has been justifiably described as the greatest playwright of all time.

Macbeth is the story of a Thane of Scotland who allows himself to be persuaded by a combination of natural and supernatural forces to murder the King in order to gain the throne for himself.

This sets in motion a frenetic series of events which culminates in the death of everything which is dear to Macbeth, and finally leads to his own unhappy end.

This is the work of a playwright at the height of his powers. It was written comparatively late in Shakespeare's career, and he had by this time, largely abandoned his more formal verse of earlier plays like Richard II. The writing style has evolved into a mature style, which is less structured and more expressive. In fact, by the time Macbeth was written in 1606, rhyming couplets were used by Shakespeare very infrequently and then only to mark the end of a scene.

I was fortunate enough to play the role of Banquo in the film you are about to see, so in a small way, I feel qualified to pose a few questions concerning a man I feel I know very well. I say man, rather than character, because it is a mark of Shakespeare's genius, that his creations come to life so completely, that we do feel we know them almost personally.

To lead us off on "Macbeth", with it's theme of the supernatural, we asked Dr Robert Smallwood of the Shakespeare Centre and Professor Stanley Wells of the Shakespeare Institute, just how Shakespeare's contemporary audiences may have reacted to the depiction of witchcraft. After all, we're dealing with a society which was very different to the one which we know today.

I/V DR. SMALLWOOD 1

I think a lot of fuss is made about Elizabethan audiences' response to the witches. If you really push me I don't much care how Elizabethan audiences responded to the witches. If we can only understand the play Macbeth by doing a huge amount of research into Elizabethan beliefs and Elizabethan laws about witches, then the play is a historical document and not a work of art. It's Johnson, isn't it. Who says that Shakespeare was not of an age but for all time and I profoundly believe that. I think what Shakespeare wants from the witches is a kind of theatricalisation of the idea of temptation.

EXTRACT 2

Witch

In the poisoned entrails throw:

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Toad that under cold stone Days
and nights has thirty-one.
Sweltered venom, sleeping got,
Boil thou first i'the charmed pot.
Witches Double, double, toil and trouble;
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.

I/V PROF. WELLS 1

The witches are always a problem for modern audiences and for modern directors of course. They are too liable to become pantomime figures with their odd properties of dead thumbs and that sort of thing cast into a cauldron.

EXTRACT 3

Witches Finger of birth-strangled babe,
Ditch delivered by a drab,

I/V PROF. WELLS 2

There were varied attitudes to witchcraft in Shakespeare's day, just as there are in our own. You can't talk in any sort of overall terms on Elizabethan attitude to witchcraft but we might, for instance, take as an example the attitude of James I, the king at the time that Macbeth was written, who himself had written a book before he was king of England, when he was still king of Scotland, about witchcraft, a book called Demonology in which he shows that he believed at that point in witchcraft. This would have made the witches, I think, a more powerful, imaginative symbol in Shakespeare's time than they are easily seen to be nowadays, which is why modern directors often have to find more modern equivalents for the witches in a sense.

PRESENTER

It could be argued that the most popular play that Shakespeare wrote was "Macbeth". It is certainly the most frequently performed of the tragedies, it is also the most accessible. The single plot is simple and easy to follow, the action is fast paced and gripping in its intensity.

Some critics have argued that despite its popularity, this is actually one of the most superficial of the tragedies. Whereas King Lear, written shortly after Macbeth, has been described famously as the "great Stonehenge of the mind", there remains the suspicion that, in some circles, "Macbeth" is not considered to be one of the intellectual heavyweights of the Shakespeare cannon, and possibly, we could be dealing here with a work, which is more concerned with action rather than the intellectual content.

For my part, I am sure that's not the case, but it is a question that bears closer examination.

I/V DR. SMALLWOOD 2

I think Macbeth certainly is a thriller. It's one of Shakespeare's shortest plays, it's one of Shakespeare's most violent plays. It's one of Shakespeare's most concentrated plays. It's a play without any kind of sub-plot at all and its movement is extraordinarily rapid from the inception of the idea of killing Duncan to the final awful consequences of the road that that takes Macbeth along. So certainly it's a thriller. It is a thriller also in one very technical sense, in that it almost all takes place in the dark. There is no play of Shakespeare's that is more a night play than Macbeth.

EXTRACT 4

Lady Macbeth My husband!

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Macbeth	I have done the deed. Didst thou not hear a noise?
Lady Macbeth	I heard the owl scream and the cricket's cry. Did not you speak?
Macbeth	When?
Lady Macbeth	Now.
Macbeth	As I descended?
Lady Macbeth	Aye.
Macbeth	Hark! Who lies i'the second chamber?
Lady Macbeth	Donalbain.
Macbeth	This is a sorry sight.

I/V PROF. WELLS 3

It is a thrilling and exciting story but it is a lot more than that too. It's a play that works on many levels at once and the reason why it is regarded as a great play, I suppose, rather than just a good melodrama, is the way that it does explore more fundamental aspects of the human condition. EXTRACT 5

Macbeth	I could not say 'Amen'
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When they did say 'God bless us.'

Lady Macbeth	Consider it not so deeply.
Macbeth	But wherefore could not I pronounce 'Amen'?

I had most need of blessing, and 'Amen'

Stuck in my throat.

Lady Macbeth	These deeds must not be thought
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After these ways; so, it will make us mad.

PRESENTER

Macbeth is accompanied in the early part of the play by my character, a fellow warrior and noble of Scotland, called Banquo. While Macbeth takes the path into darkness and evil, Banquo remains true to the noble qualities and loyalty, which we can see is in him.

Critics often comment that Banquo is the mirror image of Macbeth, the Macbeth that could have been, had he stayed on the right path. It is a topic that hopefully repays some detailed examination.

I/V DR. SMALLWOOD 3

We haven't any idea at that point that Macbeth is going to move against Banquo. He has said nothing to the audience whatsoever but the audience immediately hearing Banquo say that, thinks this man is a danger to Macbeth, and Macbeth we have taken into our confidence. It seems to me that the audience thinks of the idea of killing Banquo before we know that Macbeth has thought of the idea of killing Banquo.

I/V PROF. WELLS 4

Banquo might almost be seen as a conscience figure for Macbeth. He is important partly because in the opening episode in which he and Macbeth are first seen - Banquo

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and Macbeth come on together - both of them are presented with the same temptation, but Banquo is the one who does not yield to temptation. As the play goes on, Banquo retains this symbolic function as a sort of counterpoint to Macbeth, as his conscience before he can go on to commit the crimes of the rest of the play.

EXTRACT 6

Banquo Thou hast it now: King, Cawdor, Glamis, all
 As the weird women promised; and I fear Thou
 playest most foully for't.

I/V PROF. WELLS 5

You can't totally kill conscience. Murder is not enough, so that Macbeth still retains within himself the capacity to be moved by Banquo, even after Banquo has died. The conscience is still partly there and that's why the banquet scene is such a powerful and moving scene as it is, I think.

PRESENTER

The relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth alters dramatically by the time Macbeth has committed the last of his crimes. Famously, she descends into madness, just at the time when Macbeth appears to be gathering strength and resolve to, in his words, "try to the last".

I/V PROF. WELLS 6

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in the early part of the play are portrayed as an ideal married couple.....

EXTRACT 8

Macbeth My dearest love,

Duncan comes here tonight.

Lady Macbeth And when goes hence?

Macbeth Tomorrow, as he purposes.

I/V PROF. WELLS 7

..... not in any very modern domestic sense, but Macbeth has Lady Macbeth as somebody who wishes what she regards as good for him - she thinks it would be a good thing for him to become king and in fact also for her to become queen and she supports her husband in a totally loyal and devoted way.

EXTRACT 9

Macbeth We will proceed no further in this business.
 He hath honoured me of late, and I have bought
 Golden opinions from all sorts of people Which
 would he worn now in their newest gloss, Not cast
 aside so soon.

Lady Macbeth Was the hope drunk
 Wherein you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since?
 And wakes it now to look so green and pale At what it
 did so freely?

I/V DR. SMALLWOOD 4

A very usual way of playing the relationship, playing the partnership, these days is of

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Lady Macbeth using her sexuality as a kind of bribe to Macbeth to get him to kill Duncan, as it were, for her. 'When thou derst do it, then thou wert a man' she says, with an implication that one sees, I think perfectly legitimately - I don't want to complain about this - I don't think it is the only way to it, but perfectly legitimately in some productions, that if he doesn't kill Duncan for her then their sexual relationship will be concluded by her.

EXTRACT 10

Lady Macbeth	From this time Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard To be the same in thine own act and valour As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life, And live a coward in thine own esteem, Letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would', Like the poor cat i'the adage?
Macbeth	Prithee peace. I dare do all that may become a man; Who dares do more is none.
Lady Macbeth	What beast was't then That made you break this enterprise to me? When you durst do it, then you were a man; And to be more than what you were, you would Be so much more the man. Nor time nor place Did then adhere, and yet you would make both.#

I/V DR. SMALLWOOD 5

She wants Duncan killed but needs his physical strength to get it done. He, in a sense, also wants to kill Duncan, I mean we see that in the soliloquies with which he responds to the witches prophecy that he will be king. He wants that power very, very badly but, he has the physical strength of doing it obviously because Duncan is an old man, or normally portrayed as old, he's got the physical ability to do it but actually he doesn't have the willpower to do it without her, so they absolutely need each other for this first phase of the play.

EXTRACT 11

Lady Macbeth	I have given suck, and know How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me; I would while it was smiling in my face Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you Have done to this.
Macbeth	If we should fail?
Lady Macbeth	We fail! But screw your courage to the sticking place, And we'll not fail.

I/V PROF. WELLS 8

But it's a relationship that breaks down after the murder of Duncan - it begins to go, Macbeth seems to feel it's necessary to act on his own and Lady Macbeth fades out of the picture.

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From the moment the deed is done, Macbeth is off stage twelve lines and he comes back, in his own words, 'with his eternal fate sealed'. Twelve lines to seal your eternal fate. He comes back and from that moment they are not talking the same language. I mean, he's talking about Macbeth 'has murdered sleep' and that 'one cried sleep no more and the other answered and he couldn't say amen' and so on. And then you get Macbeth saying things like 'Oh there are two lodged together', you know, like some little seaside landlady really, all of a sudden, and he's in the wilds of self-destructive imaginings, 'a little water clears us of this deed'.

EXTRACT 12

Lady Macbeth	A little water clears us of this deed How easy is it then, your conscious Has left thee unattended. Get on your night gown, unless occasion Calls and show us to be watchers.
Macbeth	To know my deed, to best not know myself.

No, no, no, they are not talking the same language at all at this point and of course the next time we see them together they are a very, very long way apart indeed. Macbeth has conceived the idea of killing Banquo by this point and he tells Lady Macbeth not to bother about it.

EXTRACT 13

Macbeth	There's comfort yet, they are ceilable Lady Macbeth What's to be done?
Macbeth	Be innocent of the knowledge dearest chuck, till thou applaud the deed.

'Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck, til you applaud the dead'. What a patronising thing to say, you know, don't trouble your pretty little head about it darling, and a little bit after that he's dismissing everybody.

EXTRACT 14

Macbeth	Let every man be master of his time, till seven at night. To make society the sweeter welcome will keep ourselves to supper time. Alone, then God be with you.
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'We will be alone til seven at night, til supper we will keep ourself alone', meaning get out of here as well you, Lady Macbeth, as all these other superfluous courtiers.

But as the play goes on Lady Macbeth reacts imaginatively in a way which much more resembles the way in which Macbeth had worked in the earlier part of the play and this is the importance of the sleepwalking scene in the play. EXTRACT 15

Lady Macbeth Yet here's a spot Doctor She speaks. I'll set down what
come from

her to satisfy my remembrance.
Lady Macbeth Out, damn spot, out I say

I/V PROF. WELLS 10

And the sleepwalking scene shows us the subconscious that Lady Macbeth, we may assume, has had to suppress, to clamp down on, in the earlier part of the play.

I/V DR. SMALLWOOD 10

And she, in the sleepwalking scene, is in the world of wild imaginings that he was, asking questions like 'Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?', a question that comes for her three acts too late, I suppose, otherwise they would neither of them have gone down the road that they have gone down.

EXTRACT 16

Doctor Go to, go to: you have known what you should not.

Gentlewoman She has spoke what she should not, I am
sure of that. Heavens knows what she has known.

Lady Macbeth Here's the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes
of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh! Oh!

PRESENTER

It has often been said that Macbeth is the one exponent of evil, for whom we nonetheless, still hold some sympathy. We stay with Macbeth on his journey from the moment he meets the witches to his grisly end on the battlefield, and despite the fact that he performs a series of wicked deeds, we never quite lose our fascination for him.

It's a theme which has enthralled writers and critics over the years and it's one which is well worth examining in some detail.

EXTRACT 17

Macbeth They have tied me to a stake, I cannot fly,
But bear-like I must fight the course. What's he
That was not born of woman? Such a one Am I
to fear, or none.

I/V PROF. WELLS 11

Macbeth is certainly not a figure of unqualified evil. In the first place, Shakespeare establishes him immediately he comes on as a great warrior and that in itself we, I suppose, must regard as admirable. Of course, it's not so easy nowadays to admire a person, perhaps, for being a killer. In battle, and that's part of the moral complexity of the play isn't it, that Macbeth is admired by people in his won society and by himself for being able to kill people in battle.

EXTRACT 18

Young Seyward What is thy name?
Macbeth Thou'lt be afraid to hear it.
Young Seyward No, though thou call'st thyself a hotter name
Than any is in hell.

SWEDISH FILM

Really in my definition I don't think Macbeth is pessimistic in any profound sense at all. There is an awful sense of waste, of terror, of fear about the play but Macbeth is absolutely clear as he contemplates the murder of Duncan that if he goes ahead with it he will destroy what he calls his eternal jewels. I think Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's most intense plays, one of the most theatrically exciting and energised of his plays. It's so quick, so fast, so inexorable in the progression from the first idea of power, get power by killing, killing once, kill again, kill again, kill more, kill more and the person who begins entirely one of us takes us through the process of making those decisions that follow inexorably one after the other. Once you have done a crime you need to do another to cover it up and I think the theatrical intensity in that, the vividness of the relationship between Macbeth and the audience pulls you through those experiences in a way which, in a half decent production, is extraordinarily exciting and involving and when Malcolm comes on at the end as a 'dead butcher' and his wife as 'a fiend-like queen' you say, uh,uh, you don't know the half. No, no, it was different from that, it was more important than that, it really took us through this experience and I think Shakespeare has put his finger on some very, very raw nerves indeed. EXTRACT 23

Macbeth

Blow wind, come lack
At least we'll die with hardness on our back.