



# **THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD IN MACBETH**

## **2022**

### **Obsessions and Fears**

notes taken from various high-quality course such as Emma Smith and Brinda Charry

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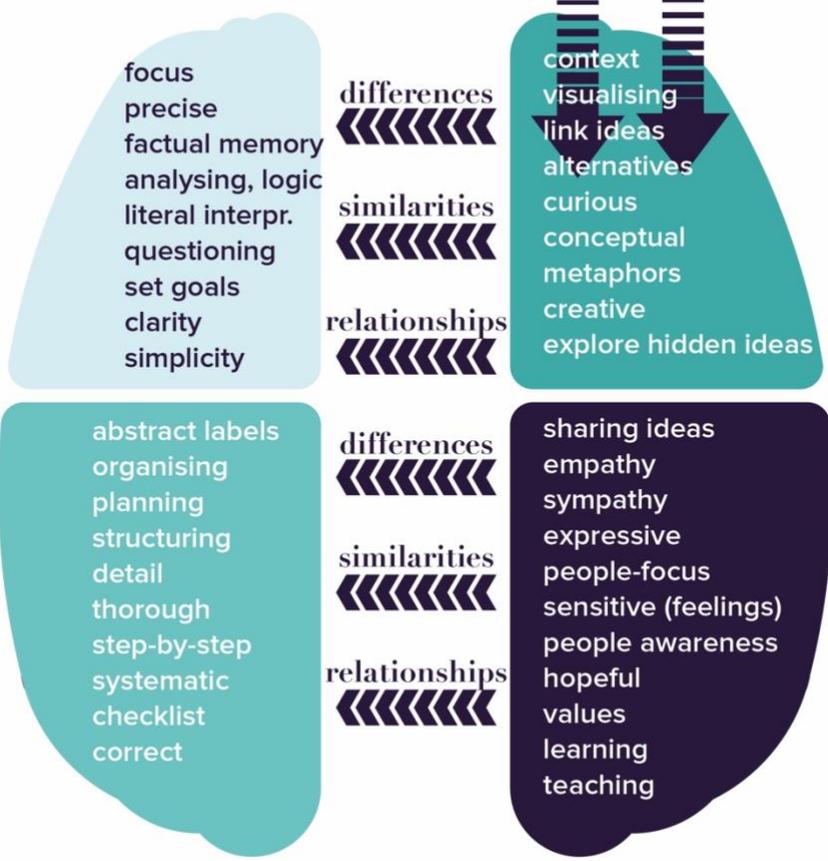




A

stored information

B



D

new information

C

## RIGHT-BRAIN QUESTIONS FOR THINKING ABOUT CONTEXT

Whenever you read about context, you should try to ask the following questions

- Is this similar to something in the text(s) I'm reading?
  - What is it similar to?
    - Themes
    - Ideas
    - Characters
    - Symbols
    - Scenes
    - Incidents
  - What's the relationship between the context and my text?
    - In what way(s) is it similar?





- Why might the author have made that connection?

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## TEXT COLOUR CODE

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- Background information
- Important information that links to text
- Examples

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## RELEVANT PERIODS IN MACBETH SIMPLIFIED

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- Middle Ages (medieval period): 5<sup>th</sup> century (year 400)– 13<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> (years 1200/1300/1400) centuries
- Renaissance: 14<sup>th</sup> century (year 1500) - 17<sup>th</sup> century (year 1700)
- Early Modern period: 13<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> (years 1200/1300/1400) centuries – late 18<sup>th</sup> century (around 1780)
- Jacobean period (reign of James VI and I): 1603 – 1625
  - Macbeth and Shakespeare’s other plays often incorporate concepts from all these periods.

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## THE RENAISSANCE AND THE MODERN WORLD

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Renaissance Europe represents one of the strongest influences on contemporary cultural heritage, however, it also constituted some profoundly antagonistic moral, social and political assumptions.

- In particular, an elaborate cult of honour had exerted a powerful grip on Early Modern Society and this is often highlighted in Shakespeare’s plays.
  - They smack of honor both. / Go get him surgeons DUNCAN (1.2.48)

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## WHAT WAS THE RENAISSANCE?

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The Renaissance was a fervent (passionate, intense) period

- ‘Renaissance’ is a French word meaning ‘rebirth’
  - It was known for European cultural, artistic, political and economic “rebirth” following the ‘dark’ Middle Ages
    - Generally described as taking place from the 14th century to the 17th century, the Renaissance promoted the rediscovery of
      - Classical philosophy
      - literature
      - and art
        - from the Ancient Romans and Greeks,





- Some of the greatest thinkers, authors, statesmen, scientists and artists in human history thrived during this era
  - while global exploration opened up new lands and cultures to European commerce
    - The Renaissance is credited with bridging the gap between the Middle Ages and modern-day civilisation.

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## THE THEME OF KINGSHIP IN THE RENAISSANCE

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Drama regularly took up the theme of kingship:

- How did one assume power?
- What were its limits?
- Who was a legitimate king?
  - history and tragedy are interwoven in many of Shakespeare's stories
    - for example, Richard III and Macbeth share similarities
      - The both focus on regicide, but...
        - Richard III is written from the perspective of the king
        - Macbeth is written from the perspective of the usurper

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## MACBETH, THE MIDDLE AGES AND FEUDALISM

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Macbeth is set during the 11th century

- right in the middle of the medieval period (Middle Ages)
- the medieval period was also the feudal period
  - the setting of the play is in Scotland, in the northernmost region of what is now the United Kingdom
    - at the time the play is set, Scotland was a separate country, although its proximity to England led to many struggles over who would rule the area.

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## SUMMARY OF THE MEDIEVAL SETTING OF MACBETH

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Although William Shakespeare's play Macbeth dates to 1606 or slightly earlier, the play is set in medieval Scotland and based on historical sources,

- primarily *Holinshed's Chronicles* supplemented by George Buchanan's *Rerum Scotticarum Historia*.
  - The historical Macbeth MacFindlaech, son of the Earl of Moray, was probably born in approximately 1005.
    - He was educated in a Christian monastery.
      - He is known to have killed King Duncan in 1040 and to have been crowned King of Scotland.
        - He traveled to Rome in 1050 for a Papal Jubilee,





- and seems to have been a charitable Christian king.
  - In August 1057 he was killed in a battle by Malcolm Canmore, who became Malcolm III of Scotland.
    - During this period, Scottish politics tended to be fissiparous, with strong clan leaders offering challenges to the ruling kings.
      - The cause of Macbeth's downfall seems to have been his role in the ongoing territorial disputes over the area near the English-Scottish borders.

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## WHAT WERE THE MIDDLE AGES?

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Middle Ages, also known as *le moyen âge*, *media tempora*, *medium aevium* and, most commonly, *the medieval period*

- often seen as the period in European history from the collapse of Roman civilisation in the 5th century CE to the period of the Renaissance (variously interpreted as beginning in the 13th, 14th, or 15th century, depending on the region of Europe and other factors).
  - This period is also described as
    - the “Dark Ages,”
      - the era is often branded as
        - a time of war
          - When the hurlyburly's done, / When the battle's lost and won. **SECOND WITCH (1.14-5)**
        - ignorance (lack of intellectual and scientific progress, obsession with witches, etc)
        - famine
        - and pandemics such as the Black Death.
          - It was a time in which the Feudal social system dominated Europe.

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## WHAT WAS FEUDALISM?

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Feudalism was the dominant social system in medieval Europe, in which the nobility (such as thanes) held lands from the Crown in exchange for military service,

- and vassals were in turn tenants of the nobles,
  - while the peasants (villeins or serfs) were obliged to live on their lord's land and give him homage (special honour and respect), labour, and a share of the produce, theoretically in exchange for military protection.
    - In essence, the feudal system was structured in the following way:
      - King at the top
      - Thanes beneath the king
        - Thanes controlled land in exchange for military service for the king
      - Villeins and serfs
        - Villeins and serfs lived on the thanes' land in exchange for good, services, honour and, eventually even money





## WHO BECOMES KING IN A FEUDAL SETTING?

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Kingship during the feudal period was not decided by hereditary means, as it is today

- In theory, it was the one who was seen as most honourable in society that was most deserving of kingship
  - One of the key ways to win honour was through success in battle, which appears to be the one of the purposes of act 1, scene 2

Sergeant

Doubtful it stood;

As two spent swimmers, that do cling together

And choke their art... but all's too weak:

For brave Macbeth--well he deserves that name--

Disdaining fortune, with his brandish'd steel,

Which smoked with bloody execution,

Like valour's minion carved out his passage

Till he faced the slave;

Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,

Till he unseam'd him from the nave to the chaps,

And fix'd his head upon our battlements.

DUNCAN

valiant cousin! worthy gentleman! (1.2)

- Here, we see Macbeth being praised for his bravery and heroics in battle by defeating the traitor Macdonwald who rebelled against Duncan by committing treachery against Duncan with the King of Norway
  - this sense of honour is emphasised in act 1 scene 2 and sets Macbeth up as the next in line to the throne and seems to be confirmed when the Witches pronounce Macbeth with 'All hail, Macbeth, thou shalt be king hereafter!'
    - But Macbeth's hopes are seemingly destroyed when Duncan announces his own son Malcolm as 'Prince of Cumberland', meaning that he will be next in line to the throne, completely foregoing feudal system of honour being the prime quality for kingship
      - Macbeth, aside reacts with anger:

MACBETH

[Aside] The Prince of Cumberland! that is a step

On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap,

For in my way it lies. (1.4)

- This is when Macbeth chooses to rebel against Duncan
  - This scene also raises questions about Duncan's sense of justice
    - Keep in mind that the question of who deserves to be king was a central topic in many Renaissance dramas.





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## WHAT WAS HONOUR? (PART 1)

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Honour, in one of its meanings, is an exclusively social virtue

- It refers to one's reputation in the community
  - To one's credit as a man of integrity
  - To the honours or rewards which are bestowed publicly as a testimony to one's virtue
  - To glory and fame which one acquires as the result of exceptional or heroic accomplishments
  - Or to the good name which is gained when one consistently behaves in a fashion which wins the respect and esteem of one's fellows
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## WHAT WAS HONOUR? (PART 2)

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Honour also refers to one's private and personal judgment of one's own...

- Inner convictions
  - And actions
    - In other words, it relates to self-esteem as much as to public approbation
      - It is this sense of self-esteem that Lady Macbeth threatens in Macbeth when she says...
        - 'When you durst do it, then you were a man;'
          - However, Lady Macbeth qualifies Macbeth's sense of masculine honour against action
            - The alliteration in 'durst do it' serves to highlight the phrase, thus drawing our attention to the two verbs, 'durst' and 'do'
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## 'DURST DO IT'

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This phrase, uttered by Lady Macbeth appears to allude strongly to Renaissance ideals of masculine honour

- 'durst', in this case works as a modal verb which Lady Macbeth uses to question Macbeth's bravery, a key quality of the Renaissance ideal man
    - Thomas Elyot (c. 1490 - 1546), an English diplomat and scholar wrote that 'a man in his natural perfection is...
      - fierce,
      - hardy,
      - strong in opinion
      - and covetous of glory,
      - desirous of knowledge'.
    - The Italian author Baldassare Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* (1528) has been translated into English and outlined the skills every courtier ought to possess:
      - he had to be a soldier
      - and a horseman
      - and possess numerous other skills
- 





- Both Elyot and Castiglione include bravery as a necessary criterion of masculine honour and the implication is that bravery indicates a man's ability to act, in spite of fear and often violently in order to achieve honour
  - When we think of fear, we often assume it refers to the kind of fear that helps us to combat threats
    - In Macbeth's case, however, the threat appears to largely be with regard to his internal sense of honour
      - To combat this type of fear, one might have to go to an extreme by overcoming their own better judgment in case they mistake good judgment for fear itself and thus Renaissance drama often had men at the centre who took conventional ideals of masculinity to extremes
        - This is particularly evident in act one, scene two when the captain describes to Duncan how Macbeth 'unseamed Macdonwald from the nave to th' chops and placed his head upon our battlements'
- Additionally, the verb 'do' suggests performing an action
  - Lady Macbeth's words appear to echo the ideas of Elyot and Castiglione by indicating that in her eyes, she can only accept him as a 'man' when he finds the courage to perform the action of murdering Duncan
    - Ironically, she uses the pronoun 'it' to refer to the murder which on one hand could simply reflect the real life sensibilities and possible heresy of talking about naming the deed of murdering the king on the Jacobean stage
      - On the other hand, it could suggest that she does not even possess the courage to say it, let alone perform such an action herself
        - She appears to confirm this when she says
          - Had he not resembled  
My father as he slept, I had done 't.(2.2.16)

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## LADY MACBETH DEFINES MACBETH'S MASCULINITY

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There is a sense of irony in this situation because the Renaissance was a time where a man's honour was seen to be attached to the fidelity of his wife

- Particularly under the threat of cuckoldry
  - Shakespeare appears to have taken this idea to an extreme, in the sense that it is indeed Macbeth's wife who defines his sense of honour, but not in the manner that would have been expected during the Renaissance.

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## MACBETH IN THE HOLINSHED CHRONICLES

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Macbeth may be a much better play looked out alongside the history plays than alongside the so-called great tragedies.

- the way Shakespeare does this is to try to sacralise the story he gets from the history of Scotland;
  - in the historical sources in Holinshed Macbeth emerges as King of Scotland out of a violent dog eat dog world of different thanes jockeying for position and power.





- Duncan had done this in his term but has now grown weak;
  - Macbeth's rise, supported in the sources by Banquo is the inevitable change of ruler in a society that has no principle of rule other than strength,
    - so the mightiest is the best; the strongest is the best in the historical Scotland that's been depicted in the in the sources.
      - So Macbeth takes power in the sources from a weakened warlord and has power taken from him in due course by another Warlord;
        - he is not, in the sources and as Shakespeare makes him, the regicide who takes the Crown from a holy King Duncan;
          - Here lay Duncan, /His silver skin laced with his golden blood;
            - it's a kind of saintly, almost more than human, a super human figure in that description.

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## HOW SHAKESPEARE PORTRAYS REGICIDE IN MACBETH

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On the one hand, the regicide in Shakespeare's play can be seen a crime against nature itself

- 'Tis unnatural,  
Even like the deed that's done. On Tuesday last,  
A falcon, towering in her pride of place,  
Was by a mousing owl hawk'd at and kill'd. [Old Man: 2.4]
  - This idea could be symbolic of the Renaissance belief that the entire universe has inherent order and balance that established by God
  - It could also reflect the concept of the Great Chain of Being
    - the sense of moral outrage and disturbance in Shakespeare's play, then, is entirely his invention
      - he turns his sources into a play in which rightful succession is interrupted by the terrible ambitious agency of Macbeth;
        - Macbeth is a single person who upsets the way things ought to be;
          - a type of parable of individual agency in the play rather than as we get in the sources which is the story of political instability in which might not right always rules.
            - Regicide in Macbeth can also be seen as a result of Duncan not respecting the structure of the feudal system, where the most honourable was most deserving to be next in line to the throne
              - Act 1, scene 1 sets Macbeth up as the next in line to the throne because of his successes in battle; however, Macbeth appears to feel betrayed by Duncan naming Malcolm as next in line to the throne:
                - We will establish our estate upon  
Our eldest, Malcolm, whom we name hereafter  
The Prince of Cumberland;

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## REMAINDERS AND REMINDERS FROM THE SOURCE TEXT

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We can see remainders and reminders of the world of the sources –

- that politically unstable violent world of the sources:
  - it's still in Macbeth and the most vivid example is possibly the description of Macbeth in the battle in Act 1 Scene 2.
    - Before we even met Macbeth the captain described his capacity for extreme ruthlessness:
      - 'brave Macbeth well he deserves that name disdainful fortune with his brandish'd steel which smok'd with bloody execution like valour's minion carved out his passage till he face the slave which ne'er shook nor bade farewell to him till he unseam'd him from the nave to the chops and fix'd his head upon our battlements'.
      - King Duncan's reply 'oh Valiant cousin! worthy gentleman' makes clear that he approves.
        - Shakespeare's Macbeth is at this point like his avatar in Holinshed - a man who has gained power to extreme violence;
          - what changes is not that he becomes violent or that violence enters the peaceful world of Scotland,
            - it's rather that that violence is turned against rather than for the Sovereign.
              - In this, we might think that Macbeth does not need the witches, particularly if we say that Shakespeare tells us this story as a parable of individual agency In which one person's unwillingness or refusal to be to stay in his allotted place overturns the natural order.

## Bibliography

Cherry, B. (2017). *The Arden guide to Renaissance drama*. Bloomsbury The Arden Shakespeare, pp.28 - 35.

