Free Will, Witches, Murder, and Macbeth (Part 1): Crash Course Literature #409

Crash Course: Literature
https://youtube.com/watch?v=VPYOs0EGgJk
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/VPYOs0EGgJk

Hi, I'm John Green, this is CrashCourse Literature and today we're discussing Macbeth. Now some people call it "the Scottish Play" or "the Bard's Play" because allegedly back in the 17th century a coven of witches cursed the play to punish Shakespeare for including their spells. But that's just not credible so I'm going to call it by its real name while acknowledging that there have been maybe a lot of riots and deaths and accidents associated with Macbeth in performance. But this is a YouTube ch-(crash)-you know what? Maybe we should call it "The Scottish Play."

For the record, I did my own stunts in that bit. Anyway today we're going to discuss the historical background for the play, the political and religious context in which it was written, the play as a likely collaboration, and Macbeth's famous dilemma. All right, time to find out just what all that sound and fury signifies.

[Intro Music]

Let's just go straight to the Thoughtbubble today.

So as the play begins, the Scottish generals Macbeth and Banquo have defeated the invading armies of Ireland and Norway. Great work, Scotland!

They then meet three witches who tell Macbeth, the Thane of Glamis, that he's going to become the Thane of Cawdor and then king. They tell Banquo that while he won't become king, his sons will. Macbeth calls these witches "imperfect speakers" and says that all this talk "stands not within the prospect of belief," but then Macbeth almost immediately does become the Thane of Cawdor, so he writes to his wife and she's like, "We're going to be royalty!" There's just the small matter of killing the king.

The king, Duncan, comes to stay at Macbeth's castle, and the Macbeths plan his murder. They do kill the king, but the second half of the plan, killing Duncan's sons, goes Shakespeareanly awry.

So Macbeth has to worry about those sons; he also has to worry about Banquo's son, so he hires some murderers. Banquo is killed but his son escapes.

Macbeth starts hallucinating at dinner parties so he goes to visit the witches and they tell him: stay away from Macduff - another Thane - no man born of woman can hurt you, and you'll be fine as long as Birnam Wood, the forest outside Macbeth's castle, stays put. And Macbeth's like, "Trees can't travel so I got this."

Still, he becomes more crueler and more paranoid, executing Macduff's family and trying to quash a growing resistance. Lady Macbeth, haunted by her part in the king's murder, can't get an invisible spot of blood out of her dress, begins to sleepwalk and then dies, a probably suicide.

Macduff, in league with Duncan's son Malcolm, brings an army to fight Macbeth. The army uses branches from Birnam Wood as camouflage. The army uses branches from Birnam Wood as camouflage. Macbeth holds out until he and Macduff meet on the battlefield, and then he says, "no one of woman born can hurt me!" And, Macduff's like, "I was a C-section baby!" And then he lops off Macbeth's head. Thanks Thought Bubble.

So, Macbeth is a tragedy, but it's also kind of history play. Like *King Lear* or *Cymbeline*, it's based on historical sources. Of course, those sources have their own problems, but also Shakespeare takes plenty of liberties; some of them artistic, some of them having more to do with the politics of his day and the preferences of his patron.

Most of what we know of the real Macbeth comes to us from *Holinshed's Chronicles*, published in 1577 and a source for a lot of Shakespeare. The chronicles tell us that Macbeth and Duncan where kinsmen in medieval Scotland, and that Macbeth was a great general, although maybe too cruel, and Duncan was a very compassionate king, although maybe too nice. The chronicles tell us that he was so nice that the country kind of went to the dogs, because Duncan couldn't enforce the rule of law. Also, after a battle, Macbeth and Banquo meet "three women in strange and wild apparell." So far, so Macbeth.

But, Shakespeare makes some pretty significant changes. in Holinshed, Banquo helps Macbeth slay the king, and Macbeth actually becomes a pretty good ruler, at least for a while. We read, "he set his whole intention to mainteine justice, and to punish all enormities and abuses, which had chanced through the feeble and slouthfull administration of Duncane." And, Macbeth maintains this justice and punishes the enormities for 10 years, before eventually becoming paranoid and cruel.

Shakespeare probably made some of his changes out of narrative necessity, like murder and tyranny make for a better story than boringly effective kingships. He also, of course, wanted to explore how ambition and prophecy and heirs shape human experience, but he probably left Banquo out of the murderous plotting for one very specific reason. King James I was Shakespeare's patron at the time, and King James I just happened to trace his lineage back to Banquo, who by the way, is probably a made-up figure.

So obviously, Macbeth, the king killer, had to be bad, and Banquo, the king's ancestor, had to be good, unless you're the kind of playwright who'd rather live out the rest of your career in a dungeon. Alsom King James I's men had just foiled a pretty serious assassination plot called the Gunpowder Plot, which you may remember because it involved Guy Fawkes and "Remember, remember the fifth of November" and that massively overrate movie *V for Vendetta*.

Macbeth was probably first performed the following year, so the killing of kings was a touchy subject, even touchier for James because his mother, Mary, Queen of Scots, was killed by Queen Elizabeth and his father was assassinated. So in that context, it makes sense that Shakespeare would highlight the dire consequences on offer when someone assassinates a divinely crowned king.

James I as a patron also may help to explain the text's emphasis on the supernatural, because James, himself, was super into the supernatural. So into it, in fact, that in 1597 he published a book on witchcraft called *Daemonolgie*. The book really caught on, as books by kings often do. After it, people in England became a lot more willing to believe in witches and fairies and ghosts and demons. *Daemonolgie* also helped perpetuate witch hunts all over Europe. James, in fact, participated in some of these witch hunts himself, most of which targeted vulnerable women, particularly the poor and elderly.

So taking the witches seriously is another way to flatter and interest his patron. Although, it should also be noted that taking the witches seriously leads Macbeth to disaster.

Oh, it's time for the open letter? An open letter to witch hunts, but first, let's see what's in the secret compartment today. Oh my gosh! It's Yoda, who almost certainly would have been prosecuted as a witch in 17th century England. I mean, aside from the magic and the cryptic speech patterns, there's just something to his look that I suspect wouldn't have gone over well.

Dear witch hunts,

I'm going to take the controversial opinion that I am opposed to the social order blindly attacking the weak. That's what a witch hunt is. That power structure looking to defame and/or murder people who cannot defend themselves. The publication of direct and accurate quotations, even if they're unflattering? Not an example of a witch hunt. Legal investigations into actual non-supernatural crimes? Not a witch hunt. And lastly, if you travel to a bunch of different locations to find certain items, that is not a witch hunt. That's a scavenger hunt. In short, witch hunts, I am opposed to you, but I am also opposed to wrongful characterizations of you.

Best wishes,
John Green.

All right, let's turn for a moment of authorship. All of Shakespeare's plays were written by Queen Elizabeth. And yes, that includes the ones that were written after she died. What's that? Oh, Stan informs me that most scholars agree that Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare's plays.

But, it's also possible that *Macbeth* was written in part by someone else, too. For a while, scholars have been arguing about whether another Jacobean playwright, Thomas Middleton, contributed to a later revision of the play. This would not have been unusual, because collaboration was common at the time, and some of Shakespeare's early and late plays were collaborations. Middleton almost certainly contributed to *Timon of Athens*, for instance, a Shakespeare play that is famously- what is the adjective I'm looking for- finished as *Macbeth*.

Evidence for Middleton's *Macbeth* collaboration includes the fact that the witches' songs show up in his own play *The Witches*. Also, a couple of the stage directions sound like Middleton's, as do the diction and the meter in a few cases. But, even the most enthusiastic Middleton cheerleader only credits him with at most a hundred or so lines.

I think that's worth noting, but, of course, who wrote the play is only tangentially related to what's in it, and *Macbeth* has survived through the centuries not primarily because it was written largely by Shakespeare, but because it is, you know, great.

So as the play begins, Macbeth has just won an important battle. He's the hero of the day- a day still steaming in blood. And then, he meets the witches, who have been laying in wait for him and they give him this prophecy. Now, we might wonder if the witches are real, actual witches or just some embodiment of Macbeth's own ambitions and desires. Though, the fact that Banquo also sees them does argue for reality. But, maybe they're both real and metaphorically resonant. We should also wonder if their prophecy is true. Like, can they really see into the future, or are their words a way to mess with Macbeth and tempt him to do something terrible? Is Macbeth fall inevitable or could he have avoided it if he had ignored the witches' pronouncements?

Now, I'd argue that this is not just a problem for Macbeth, all of us would like to know if our future is fated or our will is free. And, in some ways, Macbeth learning his future seems to change his future. Like, was he going to be king before he found out he was going to be king? Well, that gets into the question of predestination, which was one of the central religious debates of the era in Europe. Are you predestined to go either to heaven or hell, or do we have free will to choose our eternal fates?

Shakespeare's England was at the center of these conversations. It was officially, newly Protestant, but deeply religiously divided, and one of the geniuses of *Macbeth* is that it explores how difficult it can be to tell fate from choice. I mean, Macbeth and his wife make a lot of choices, but they also fulfill every single prophecy.

So, Macbeth knows he should not kill the king. This is a very important idea in both *Game of Thrones* and 17th century England. James I believed in a divine right of kings, the idea that kings are ordained by gods to rule. Undercutting that idea was very dangerous for political stability, because then anybody could be king, or maybe we don't even need kings. And, Shakespeare basically upholds this idea of the divine right of kings. So, on the one hand, you have moral prohibition, the risk of earthly punishment, and eternal damnation. On the other side, you have the opportunity to become King of Scotland, the 732nd most important kingdom at the time.

Deciding between what you should do and what you want to do should not be that difficult. But it is, as anyone who has ever lived in actual human life can tell you.

In the end, Macbeth cannot resist his ambition, but once he's made the decision, he sees a dagger hovering in the air in front of him. "A dagger of the mind, a false creation, proceeding from the heat-oppressèd brain." Now is Macbeth insane and hallucinating things, or is this another supernatural goad? I mean, Macbeth feels conflicted about his choice and the appearance of a dagger shows his distress, but he interprets it as legitimizing his choice to kill the king.

Not for the first time, the supernatural is open to human interpretation. A dagger hovering in the air seems like a good sign to go ahead with a murder that Macbeth both desires and is horrified by.

Reading Macbeth, you have to get used to that push-pull of attraction and repulsion. From the time the witches say "Fair is foul and foul is fair," this is a play full of contradictions and double meanings. A lot of scholars link this linguistic ambivalence to the issue of equivocation, which means answering in ways that are deliberately unclear. It's a method that Catholics, who were persecuted in England in Shakespeare's day, were encouraged to adopt, chiefly by Henry Garnet's *A Treatise On Equivocation*.

Shakespear's father was likely a Catholic, but the play suggests that there's something evil in ambiguous speech, like the kind that the witches, who speak in half-truths, use. It also suggests that there's something evil about conflicted or ambiguous morality, like the kind that Macbeth practices.

But I don't think this linguistic ambivalence is just reflective of a 17th century religious debate, I also think it's reflective of Macbeth's psychological ambivalence. He is both excited and afraid at the thought of becoming king via murder, and that gives us a little bit of insight into a man who begins a play as a decorated war hero and ends it as a decapitated butcher.

We'll pick up next time with a further discussion of Macbeth's complicated and fascinating character. Until then, if any weird sisters approach you on a blasted heath, do not listen to them. After all, it's not the prophesying that did the damage, it's the believing the prophecy. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next time.

[Outro Music]

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