

Macbeth Act 1 Scene 1 Context Guide

Witchcraft, King James I and Shakespeare's purpose

This guide explains the historical ideas behind the opening of Macbeth. Understanding them helps you explain why the witches would have seemed genuinely threatening to Shakespeare's first audiences and why their appearance establishes a dark and unnatural mood.

1 The world in which Macbeth was written

Macbeth is generally dated to around 1606, during the reign of King James I of England. This period is often called the Jacobean era, from the Latin form of James's name, Jacobus.

Belief in witchcraft was widespread, although people did not all think in exactly the same way. Many believed that witches could make agreements with the Devil, summon spirits, predict events, damage crops, cause illness or raise dangerous weather. Accusations often grew from fear, religious tension, personal disputes and attempts to explain misfortune.

People accused of witchcraft were real human beings, and many suffered imprisonment, torture or execution. Their confessions were therefore not reliable evidence that supernatural powers existed.

2 Why James was concerned about witchcraft

James was James VI of Scotland before becoming James I of England in 1603. His intense involvement with witchcraft accusations developed particularly after his marriage to Anne of Denmark.

The voyage and the storms

In 1589 and 1590, dangerous storms affected the sea journeys connected with James and Anne's marriage. Accusations later claimed that witches had tried to raise storms against the royal ships. James came to believe that a supernatural conspiracy had threatened him and his wife.

The North Berwick trials

Beginning in 1590, a group of people in Scotland were accused of witchcraft in what became known as the North Berwick witch trials. Accusations included meeting the Devil and plotting to harm the king. James took a direct interest and personally examined some of the accused. Confessions were obtained in a system in which torture and severe coercion were used, so they cannot be treated as trustworthy accounts.

Daemonologie

In 1597, James published *Daemonologie*, a book arguing that witchcraft and demonic magic were real and deserved investigation and punishment. The book shows that witchcraft was a serious religious and political concern for him, not simply an entertaining superstition.

The law

England already had laws against witchcraft. A stricter Witchcraft Act was passed in 1604, after James became king of England. Among other provisions, it made some offences involving evil spirits and harmful witchcraft punishable by death.

3 Witchcraft kingship and order

James defended the Divine Right of Kings: the belief that a monarch's authority came from God. In this way of thinking, attacking a rightful king was not only a political crime but also an offence against God's order.

Witches were commonly associated with the Devil, the enemy of God. A supposed witchcraft plot against James could therefore be understood as both supernatural rebellion and treason. This connection helps explain why Macbeth links the witches with an eventual attack on a divinely appointed king.

4 Why Shakespeare used witches

The witches were dramatically effective because they immediately created suspense, fear and uncertainty. They also connected with the interests of James, who became patron of Shakespeare's acting company in 1603. The company was then known as the King's Men.

There is no firm evidence that James personally ordered Shakespeare to write *Macbeth*. A more accurate claim is that Shakespeare shaped the play for the political and cultural world of James's court. Its Scottish setting, witchcraft, treatment of kingship and presentation of Banquo would all have had particular relevance.

Banquo and James

The Stuart royal family claimed descent from Banquo. Shakespeare's main historical source, Holinshed's *Chronicles*, presented Banquo as involved in Duncan's murder. Shakespeare significantly altered this material and made Banquo an honourable contrast to Macbeth. This change is widely understood as a way of avoiding criticism of the king's supposed ancestor and of pleasing James.

The Gunpowder Plot

The Gunpowder Plot of November 1605 was an attempt by Catholic conspirators to destroy Parliament and kill James. *Macbeth* was written in the tense political atmosphere that followed. The play's concern with treason, regicide, hidden intentions and equivocation would have been highly topical. However, it is safest to say that the play contains possible echoes of the Plot, rather than claiming that every detail was directly written about it.

5 Connecting context to Act 1 Scene 1

Detail from the scene	What it suggests
"Thunder and lightning"	The violent weather creates an ominous mood and makes nature appear disturbed. For an audience familiar with claims that witches could raise storms, their entrance during a storm would be especially threatening.
"When the battle's lost and won"	The paradox creates uncertainty. It suggests that victory and defeat can exist together and introduces a world in which clear meanings are becoming unstable.
"Fair is foul and foul is fair"	The paradox establishes appearance versus reality. Moral boundaries are confused: what looks good may be evil, and what seems secure may be dangerous.
"There to meet with Macbeth"	Macbeth is named before he appears. Shakespeare immediately links him with the witches and makes the audience anticipate their influence over him.

6 What Shakespeare may be suggesting

The witches tempt and mislead, but they do not physically force Macbeth to murder Duncan. Shakespeare therefore leaves an important question open: do supernatural forces control Macbeth, or do they awaken ambitions that already exist within him?

A strong interpretation is that the witches create temptation and uncertainty, while Macbeth remains responsible for his choices. This allows the play to explore both fate and free will.

7 How to use context in an essay

Context should help explain Shakespeare's methods and ideas. It should not become a separate history paragraph. Begin with the quotation, analyse it closely, then add the most relevant contextual link.

Shakespeare opens with "Thunder and lightning" to create an ominous and unnatural atmosphere.

The violent weather acts as pathetic fallacy and makes the natural world appear disturbed. A Jacobean audience may also have connected storms with witchcraft because witches were believed capable of controlling the weather. This would make the Weird Sisters' entrance immediately threatening and establish them as agents of disorder.

8 Accurate statements to remember

- James was interested in and deeply concerned about witchcraft, but it is too simplistic to say that everyone in Jacobean England had identical beliefs.
- The North Berwick accusations claimed that witches had raised storms against the royal voyages; this was an accusation, not proof that supernatural events occurred.
- James published *Daemonologie* in 1597 and a new English Witchcraft Act was passed in 1604.
- James became patron of Shakespeare's company, the King's Men, but there is no firm evidence that he personally commissioned *Macbeth*.
- Shakespeare changed Banquo from his source material, probably to present James's supposed ancestor more favourably.
- *Macbeth* can be linked to anxieties following the Gunpowder Plot, but these links should be expressed as interpretation rather than certainty.

9 Key terms

Jacobean: Relating to the reign of James I of England.

Daemonologie: James's 1597 book defending belief in witchcraft and demonic magic.

Divine Right of Kings: The belief that a monarch's authority comes from God.

Regicide: The killing of a king.

Equivocation: Using deliberately ambiguous or misleading language.

Pathetic fallacy: Weather or nature reflecting mood, emotion or events.

Paradox: A statement that appears contradictory but may reveal a truth.

Sources used for accuracy

- Royal Shakespeare Company, *Macbeth* Dates and Sources.
- British Library, *The Scottish Play* and the Real *Macbeth*.
- UK Parliament, *Witchcraft*.
- Shakespeare's Globe, *The Gunpowder Plot* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.