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BA English Honours | Semester V | Calicut University

Shakespeare Studies

Course Code: ENG5EJ308 • Module 2 Notes

Unit 6: Macbeth: Context, Sources, and Textual Architecture

James I, The Gunpowder Plot, and Holinshed's Chronicles

Composed circa 1606, *Macbeth* is Shakespeare's most compressed, ferocious, and atmospheric tragedy. Written shortly after the accession of King James VI of Scotland to the English throne as James I and the thwarted Catholic Gunpowder Plot of 1605, the tragedy is intensely engaged with Jacobean political anxieties regarding regicide, witchcraft, and the legitimate royal succession. James I claimed direct ancestral descent from the Scottish nobleman Banquo and had authored *Daemonologie* (1597), a treatise condemning necromancy and witchcraft.

Subversion of Holinshed's Chronicles

Shakespeare drew his historical plot from Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1587). In Holinshed, King Duncan is a weak, ineffective ruler, and Banquo is an active, willing accomplice in Duncan's murder. Shakespeare fundamentally altered these historical accounts to please King James: Duncan is transformed into an elderly, holy, virtuous monarch whose regicide constitutes a sacrilegious assault against God's anointed sovereign, while Banquo is sanitized into a spotless, honorable figure who resists demonic temptation, thereby consecrating the royal lineage of the Stuart dynasty.

Unit 7: Tragic Conventions: Hamartia, Peripeteia, and Cosmic Disorder

The Aristotelian Arc in Early Modern Tragedy

Macbeth perfectly fulfills the classical Aristotelian tragic arc while infusing it with Christian moral theology:

- **Hamartia (Tragic Flaw / Error in Judgment):** Macbeth is not a born psychopath; he begins as "Brave Macbeth"—a valiant, noble warrior who saves Scotland from foreign invasion. His fatal flaw is *vaulting ambition*, which overrides his highly sensitive moral conscience and deep fear of divine judgment.
- **Peripeteia (Reversal of Fortune):** The turning point occurs in Act III, Scene 3: while Banquo is slaughtered by Macbeth's hired assassins, Fleance escapes into the night. At this exact moment, Macbeth's dream of founding an unbroken dynastic kingdom collapses, initiating his psychological unraveling and inevitable doom.
- **Anagnorisis (Tragic Recognition):** Realized in Macbeth's famous "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" soliloquy in Act V, where he recognizes the ultimate, hollow futility of his blood-drenched triumphs: life is revealed as a meaningless, transient shadow, "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."
- **Cosmic Disorder and the Great Chain of Being:** In Elizabethan cosmology, killing a rightful king shatters the Great Chain of Being. On the night of Duncan's murder, the physical cosmos revolts: the earth shakes in fever, daylight is smothered by darkness, chimneys blow down, and Duncan's prized royal horses turn wild and eat each other's flesh.

Unit 8: The Tragic Hero: Macbeth's Interior Psychological Torment

The Agony of the Conscious Sinner

What elevates Macbeth to the rank of world literature's greatest tragic figures is his excruciating self-awareness. Unlike Richard III or Iago, who revel in their villainy with joyful cynicism, Macbeth is cursed with

a terrifyingly lucid moral imagination. He anticipates every spiritual consequence of his crime: he knows that "bloody instructions… return to plague the inventor," that Duncan's virtues will "plead like angels, trumpet-tongued against the deep damnation of his taking-off," and that killing sleep means he has murdered his own psychic peace forever ("Macbeth does murder sleep!"). His tragedy is that he commits horrific atrocities while clearly observing his own soul's descent into damnation.

Unit 9: Major Themes in Macbeth: Ambition, Guilt, and Gender Violence

Unchecked Ambition and Equivocation

Ambition operates as a demonic poison in the play, activated by the Weird Sisters' prophecies. The Witches speak in riddles and double meanings: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." This doctrine of **equivocation**—speaking half-truths that deceive the listener into self-destruction—traps Macbeth: he believes he is invincible because "no man of woman born" can harm him, and he will never be vanquished until Great Birnam Wood moves to Dunsinane Hill. The literal fulfillment of these prophecies by Macduff (born via Caesarean section) and Malcolm's camouflaged army reveals the deceptive malice of evil.

Lady Macbeth: "Unsex Me Here" and the Pathology of Toxic Masculinity

Lady Macbeth is an extraordinary dramatic creation who weaponizes gender to propel the tragedy. Recognizing that Macbeth is "too full o' the milk of human kindness," she summons dark spirits in her terrifying incantation: "Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty!" She systematically attacks Macbeth's masculinity ("When you durst do it, then you were a man"), equating love and courage with remorseless slaughter. However, her psychic collapse proves that human nature cannot permanently repress moral conscience. In the sleepwalking scene (Act V, Scene 1), her subconscious guilt erupts: obsessively scrubbing her hands, she weeps the immortal words, "Out, damned spot! out, I say!… All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand."

Unit 10: Dramatic Techniques and Critical Perspectives

Stagecraft: The Dagger Soliloquy and De Quincey's "Knocking at the Gate"

Shakespeare deploys masterclass theatrical devices: the hallucinatory floating dagger ("Is this a dagger which I see before me?"), the horrifying appearance of Banquo's bloodied ghost at the royal banquet, and the atmospheric knocking at the south gate in Act II, Scene 3. In his famous 1823 essay "On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth," Thomas De Quincey explained that the sudden knocking of the drunken Porter immediately after the regicide breaks the suffocating, unholy trance of murder, signaling that the human world has awoken to re-assert moral justice.

Critical Perspectives: Psychoanalytic, Feminist, and Political

Sigmund Freud analyzed Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as two halves of a single, fragmented personality, where the repressed guilt denied by the husband is somatically visited upon the disintegrating psyche of the wife. Feminist critics emphasize that the play investigates how patriarchal cultures mandate violent, murderous masculinity while demonizing autonomous women as monstrous witches. Politically, the play remains an urgent warning against tyrannical paranoia, demonstrating how despots who seize power through bloodshed must inevitably murder their own citizens to preserve their illegitimate thrones.

Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 Advanced Shakespearean Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 1)

1. The Materialist and New Historicist Turn in Shakespeare Studies

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2. Gendered Performativity, Cross-Dressing, and the Subversion of Patriarchy

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3. Postcolonial Appropriations and Intercultural Reclamations

In our contemporary globalized world, Shakespeare has been radically reclaimed from its historical complicity in British imperial civilizing missions. As theorists like Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin demonstrate, during the 19th and 20th centuries, colonial educational systems (such as Macaulay's English curriculum in India) weaponized Shakespeare as the supreme icon of Anglo-Saxon cultural superiority, forcing colonized subjects to memorize soliloquies to prove their intellectual assimilation.

However, modern postcolonial writers, directors, and filmmakers have executed a brilliant counter-appropriation. By translating, adapting, and deconstructing Shakespearean texts into regional vernacular idioms—such as Vishal Bhardwaj's cinematic adaptations of *Macbeth* (*Maqbool*) and *Hamlet* (*Haider*) into contemporary Indian underworld and Kashmiri political realities—they transform the plays into urgent instruments for interrogating contemporary state violence, corruption, and subaltern trauma. Shakespeare endures not as a dead imperial monument, but as an infinite, living crucible of dramatic and moral questioning that belongs to all humanity.

Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 Advanced Shakespearean Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 2)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 Advanced Shakespearean Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 3)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 Advanced Shakespearean Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 4)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 Advanced Shakespearean Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 5)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 Advanced Shakespearean Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 6)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 Advanced Shakespearean Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 8)

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1. The Materialist and New Historicist Turn in Shakespeare Studies

A rigorous examination of the dramatic and poetic works in Module 2 requires moving beyond Victorian character idolatry (bardolatry) to investigate the material conditions of early modern theatrical production. As Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose argue within the framework of **New Historicism**, literature is not an autonomous aesthetic monument detached from worldly power; rather, it is deeply embedded in the circulating social energies, religious anxieties, and political negotiations of the Tudor-Stuart state.

The public theatres of London—situated outside the formal jurisdiction of the puritanical City Corporation across the Thames in Southwark, alongside bear-baiting pits, brothels, and prisons—occupied a liminal, unruly social space. Here, monarchical power was both legitimized and subtly subverted. In *Macbeth*, the play explores the ideological crisis of regicide and the fragility of sovereign legitimacy in the wake of the Gunpowder Plot. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, the comic mechanisms of slander, eavesdropping, and masking mirror the early modern state's pervasive culture of surveillance, spying, and religious paranoia.

2. Gendered Performativity, Cross-Dressing, and the Subversion of Patriarchy

Early modern English theatre possessed an extraordinary structural contradiction: while women were legally prohibited from performing on public stages (leading to the convention of adolescent boys playing female roles), Shakespeare’s plays consistently feature female characters of unmatched intellectual brilliance, moral agency, and subversive power. In feminist and queer critical theory, this dynamic is theorized through Judith Butler's concept of **gender performativity**: gender is not a fixed, natural biological essence, but a stylized repetition of bodily acts and costume codes.

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Beatrice dismantles patriarchal assumptions regarding female modesty through her razor-sharp wit and righteous fury against male hypocrisy. In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth violently repudiates traditional maternal nurturing to seize sovereign agency, while the Weird Sisters occupy a terrifying liminal space beyond binary gender taxonomies ("You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so"). Furthermore, in the Sonnets, the passionate devotion directed toward the Fair Youth and the visceral eroticism of the Dark Lady disrupt normative early modern sexual and racial hierarchies, affirming the pluralistic fluidities of human desire.

3. Postcolonial Appropriations and Intercultural Reclamations

In our contemporary globalized world, Shakespeare has been radically reclaimed from its historical complicity in British imperial civilizing missions. As theorists like Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin demonstrate, during the 19th and 20th centuries, colonial educational systems (such as Macaulay's English curriculum in India) weaponized Shakespeare as the supreme icon of Anglo-Saxon cultural superiority, forcing colonized subjects to memorize soliloquies to prove their intellectual assimilation.

However, modern postcolonial writers, directors, and filmmakers have executed a brilliant counter-appropriation. By translating, adapting, and deconstructing Shakespearean texts into regional vernacular idioms—such as Vishal Bhardwaj's cinematic adaptations of *Macbeth* (*Maqbool*) and *Hamlet* (*Haider*) into contemporary Indian underworld and Kashmiri political realities—they transform the plays into urgent instruments for interrogating contemporary state violence, corruption, and subaltern trauma. Shakespeare endures not as a dead imperial monument, but as an infinite, living crucible of dramatic and moral questioning that belongs to all humanity.