Shakespeare and the Elizabethan world

The Elizabethan World

History and Politics

- The Elizabethan Era is the period associated with the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558–1603) and is often considered to be a golden age in English history.
- It was the height of the English Renaissance and saw the flowering of English literature and poetry. This was also the time during which Elizabethan theatre flourished and William Shakespeare, among others, composed plays that broke away from England's past style of plays and theatre.
- It was a brief period of largely internal peace concerning the battles between Protestants and Catholics and the battles between parliament and the monarchy that surrounded the Elizabethan Age.

Short historical overview:
1558 Elizabeth I was crowned.
1576 London's first theatre opened outside the north-east city.
1574 London's theatres are banned from the city to Southwark.
1603 Queen Elizabeth dies. James VI of Scotland becomes King James I.

London

- London’s population increased dramatically between 1550 and 1600.
- London’s inhabitants came from all social classes: aristocrats, lawyers, rich merchants, craftsmen, dismissed soldiers, servants, thieves and beggars.
- At Shakespeare’s time, London was the most important trading city in the world.
- London was the centre of English cultural and intellectual life. It had ten open-air amphitheatres, five hall playhouses and four city inns used for plays between 1576 and 1594.

Beliefs

1. Great Chain of Being

- Another common belief was the “Great Chain of Being”. It says that every being on earth has its place in the world’s hierarchy. God à Angels à Humans à Animals à Plants à Stones… Therefore every human has also a place in the hierarchy. King à Aristocrats à subjects...
- In Shakespeare’s plays the order is often messed up through murder and revolution, but at the end of those plays there’s the restoration of the order (e.g. Julius Caesar, Hamlet, Macbeth). Since the order is believed to be given by nature (and God), someone who produces disorder (e.g. a subject who rebels against his king) acts unnaturally or against God’s laws of the world.

2. Witchcraft

- The fear of witchcraft came from the Christian belief in Heaven and Hell. People lived in fear of eternal damnation, which they saw as a consequence of witchcraft.
- Shakespeare’s audience must have seen signs of a man and a woman seized by demonic possession in the play Macbeth. The religious imagery in the play would remind the audience of damnation that awaited those who challenged Christian beliefs (e.g. through murder). The Weird Sisters are a typical image of witches as they were believed in at Shakespeare’s time. They brew disgusting potions, use magic spells, tell the future, sail in a sieve, have spirits, etc.
The Elizabethan Theatre

Plays and Playwright

Playwrights had no ownership of the plays they wrote. Once a play was sold to a company, the company owned it, and the playwright had no control over casting, performance, revision or publication.

Other playwrights at Shakespeare’s time: Ben Johnson, Christopher Marlowe, Richard Brome, Francis Beaumont, Robert Green, Edward de Vere.

The Globe

It was built in 1599 and belonged to Shakespeare's theatre company.

At Shakespeare’s time 3000 visitors fitted into The Globe, today only 1500 fit into the theatre.

There were no curtains, but two doors through which actors could go in and out.

The Audience

It was a cross-section of the English population since all classes and professions were represented.

There was always a lot of illness and since people stood so close; the theatres had to be closed sometimes, especially in summer, because of plagues.

The audience didn't listen in hushed silence. They talked to each other or bought goods from hawkers walking around.

Shakespeare’s Biography

William Shakespeare, son of Mary Arden and John Shakespeare, was born on April, 26th 1564 in Stratford upon Avon.

In 1587 Shakespeare (23) left his family in Stratford-upon-Avon and went to London. He probably joined a group of actors who came through Stratford.

In 1594 Shakespeare was a member of the Chamberlain’s Men company.

Shakespeare’s theatre company opened their own theatre “The Globe” in 1599.

In 1603 Queen Elizabeth I died and was succeeded by King James I, who later made the Chamberlain’s Men to his own theatre group, called the King’s Men.

Shakespeare published his sonnets in 1609 while the theatres in London had to close because of the plague.

In 1613 the Globe Theatre burned down to the ground during a performance of Henry VIII.

Shakespeare died around the end of April in 1616 (perhaps April, 23rd) in Stratford-upon-Avon, where he was buried in the Holy Trinity Church.
Macbeth

Synopsis

Scotland. Macbeth and Banquo, leaders of the Scottish army, meet a group of witches who prophesy the future. They address Macbeth as Thane of Cawdor and King of Scotland, and tell Banquo that he will be the father of kings. The two men try to learn more, but the witches vanish. Messengers arrive with news that Duncan, the current king of Scotland, has made Macbeth Thane of Cawdor. The first part of the witches’ prediction has come true.

In Macbeth's castle, Lady Macbeth reads a letter from her husband telling her of the events that have just transpired. She resolves to follow her ambitions. A servant announces that Duncan will soon arrive at the castle, and when Macbeth enters, she tells him that they must kill the king. Duncan arrives. Macbeth has a vision of a dagger, then leaves to commit the murder. On his return, he tells his wife how the act has frightened him, and she tells him that he needs more courage. They both leave as Banquo enters with Macduff, a nobleman, who discovers the murder. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth pretend to be horrified and join the others in condemning the murder.

Macbeth has become king. Duncan’s son, Malcolm, is suspected of having killed his father and has fled to England. Worried about the prophecy that Banquo’s children will rule, Macbeth and his wife now plan to kill him and his son, Fleance, as well. As Macbeth leaves to prepare the double murder, Lady Macbeth hopes that it will finally make the throne secure.

Outside the castle, assassins wait for Banquo, who appears with his son, warning him of strange forebodings. Banquo is killed, but Fleance escapes.

Lady Macbeth welcomes the court to the banquet hall and sings a drinking song, while Macbeth receives news that Banquo is dead and his son has escaped. About to take Banquo’s seat at the table, Macbeth has a terrifying vision of the dead man accusing him. His wife is unable to calm her unsettled husband, and the courtiers wonder about the king’s strange behavior. Macduff vows to leave the country, which is now ruled by criminals.

The witches gather again, and Macbeth visits them, demanding more prophecies. Apparitions warn him to beware of Macduff and assure him that “no man of woman born” can harm him, and that he will be invincible until Birnam Wood marches on his castle. In another vision, he sees a procession of future kings, followed by Banquo. Horrified, Macbeth collapses. The witches disappear and his wife finds him. They resolve to kill Macduff and his family.

On the Scottish border, Macduff has joined the refugees. His wife and children have been killed. Malcolm appears with British troops and leads them to invade Scotland.

Lady Macbeth is sleepwalking, haunted by the horrors of what she and her husband have done.
In another room in the castle, Macbeth awaits the arrival of his enemies. He realizes that he will never live to a peaceful old age. Messengers bring news that Lady Macbeth has died, and that Birnam Wood appears to be moving. English soldiers appear, camouflaged with its branches. Macduff confronts Macbeth and tells him that he was not born naturally but had a Caesarean birth. He kills Macbeth and proclaims Malcolm king of Scotland.

**Dramatic structure**

**Act I: Exposition or Introduction**

Introduction of the main character, establishing the world in which the action takes place and all thematic elements that are going to resonate throughout the story, and any problems or goals the protagonist is facing (i.e. the conflict). *The first two scenes of the play set the dark and mystical atmosphere and describe the brave deeds of Macbeth.*

**Act II: Rising Action**

During the Rising Action, the basic conflict introduced in Act I is complicated by secondary conflicts and obstacles, including lesser antagonists that can work together with or without the main antagonist. *Macbeth, considering his newest victories and achievements, is tempted to seize the throne. He is encouraged by the prophecy and, most importantly, Lady Macbeth. He then murders Duncan.*

**Act III: Climax**

The climax marks a notable change in the protagonist's journey towards their goal. With tragedy, the protagonist begins the story from a high position before everything begins to unravel. This is where the bulk of the drama or action takes place. *Macbeth has Banquo and Fleance assassinated, but Fleance escapes. He is distracted by fears and hallucinations and starts to lose his self-control. The audience knows he is doomed from this point on.*

**Act IV: Falling Action**

During the Falling Action, the conflict finally comes to a head, and a clear winner and loser are determined. This Falling Action may also contain a final moment of suspense, in which one or more possible outcomes are in doubt until the Resolution. *Macbeth situation quickly deteriorates as the falling action runs almost without interruption from the banquet to the end of the play. Characters that were previously kept in the background, such as Malcolm and Macduff, now play a major role.*

**Act V: Dénouement or Resolution**

The dénouement or resolution ties up all the loose ends and concludes the story. All of the conflicts are resolved, the characters die or return to normalcy, and the viewer experiences an emotional release (catharsis). Traditional tragedies end in a catastrophe that leaves the protagonist a shell of his former self. *Macbeth’s dénouement features a double catastrophe: The death of Lady Macbeth and the fall of Macbeth at the hands of Macduff.*
Elements of Shakespearean Tragedy

- **The bigger they are, the harder they fall**: The Shakespeare tragedies often focus on the fall of a nobleman. By presenting the audience with a man with excessive wealth or power, his eventual downfall is all the more tragic.
- **Fate/Fortune**: As the tragic hero/heroine is of high estate and is a public figure, his/her downfall produces a contrast which affects not only his/her personal life, but the fate and welfare of the entire nation or the empire.
- **External pressures**: Shakespeare’s tragic heroes often fall victim to external pressures. Fate, evil spirits and manipulative characters all play a hand in the hero’s downfall.
- **Dramatic irony**: The audience knows more than a character in the play.
- **Pathetic fallacy**: A character’s state of mind or a major event is reflected in nature.
- **Comic relief**: A tragic, tense or very sad scene is followed by one that is comical to give the audience a short break from the previous tension. Example: The Porter

Aristotle’s tragic hero

- **Pre-eminence**: The hero has a high status and morality and is inherently good; the audience looks up to him
- **The fatal flaw**: The tragic heroes are all fundamentally flawed. It is this weakness that ultimately leads to their downfall.
- **Error in judgement (Hamartia)**: The hero makes a deliberate choice that leads to his fall. It does not happen out of wickedness and therefore can help show his innocence or helplessness.
- **Insight**: The hero recognizes his mistakes and acknowledges his “self-destruction”.
- **Catharsis**: The hero dies, the emotions of the audience are relieved, justice is done and the order is restored; optional redemption of the character.

Macbeth - A tragic hero?

Macbeth goes from good to bad, but retrieves his former nature in the last moments of his life as he recovers from his insanity just before dying. He also gets his old qualities as a hero back, such as his bravery. Macbeth keeps on fighting even though his cause is already lost. He accepts his fate without bowing to it; one can says he therefore triumphs over it. In conclusion, Macbeth can be considered a typical tragic hero.

Topics in Macbeth

The supernatural (Devil, etc.) and its influence on human life, the relation of the hero to authority and his ambition, the role of men and women (Lady Macbeth), the difference between fate and free will, the corruption of power and violence…

Cinematic realizations

Things to consider when analyzing modern interpretations

- Change of language and setting and the subsequent effects
- Changes in narrative perspective (focus on other characters etc.)
- Interpretation of the universal message/timeless topics
- Transposition of traditional and modern social settings
- Symbolism/imagery, both Shakespearean and modern
Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971)

*Main differences:* Graphic violence and nudity, causing complaints that such blatancy and literalness diminished the complexity and ambiguity of the original text. In keeping with the Polanski tradition of complex female characters, Francesca Annis creates a Lady Macbeth who looks and acts soft yet is capable of the coldest schemes.

Peter Moffat ShakespeaRe-Told (2005)

Set in a three Michelin star restaurant owned by celebrity chef Duncan Docherty, with Joe Macbeth as the sous-chef and his wife Ella as the Maître d’. Joe and his fellow chef Billy Banquo are annoyed that Duncan takes credit for Joe’s work, and that Duncan’s son Malcolm has, in their opinion, no real flair for the business. Then they encounter three supernatural bin men who predict that Macbeth will get ownership of the restaurant, as will Billy’s children. Joe and Ella are inspired to kill Duncan, but the binmen subsequently warn that Macbeth should be wary of Peter Macduff, the head waiter…

Despite the obvious changes in language, the ShakespeaRe-Told series were acclaimed as powerful and entertaining contemporary adaptations, said to be “respectful and respectable”.

Advantages and disadvantages of adapting Shakespearean works

**Pro:**
- More modern version, thus more accessible and interesting to audience
- Simplified plot and audience
- Reinforce the universality of the play’s message
- Preservation of cultural heritage

**Contra:**
- Can be taken too far out of context
- Story becomes less authentic or credible
- Falsification of original intention
- Certain loss of quality when changing the language