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How a Modern Audience's Interpretation of Shakespeare's Play Macbeth May Differ from his Original Audience's Interpretation

In what ways are the themes, messages and ideas in the play Macbeth presented, and how would the differences between Elizabethan and modern society affect how they are interpreted?

Many famous plays are themed around how the faults of the protagonists can lead to disaster. Macbeth, by William Shakespeare, is one such play, and follows the story of a Scottish thane named Macbeth. He is given a prophecy by three witches, and following this, claims the throne by killing the rightful king, but is driven by grief to become a tyrant, and is eventually turned against and killed. Many of the themes in this play may have different relevance to a modern society than the society of Shakespeare's time. Shakespeare uses various language techniques and formats to present, repeat and emphasise the messages, and in doing so makes the messages clear enough that both audiences would likely interpret them as intended.

A Shakespearean audience and modern audience would have different beliefs about how important the rightful king is, and so could interpret this aspect of the play differently. In Lady Macbeth's soliloquy where she asks for the strength to murder King Duncan, she says "come, thick night, and pall thee in the dunest smokes of hell [...] nor heaven peek through the blanket of the dark" (1 v 48-51). The phrases 'thick night', 'smokes', and 'blanket of the dark' all foreshadow that the night of Duncan's murder will be particularly dark and cloudy, likely due to a storm. For Shakespeare's audience, they would likely already expect that the night would be stormy and chaotic, as they believed that the rightful king was appointed by God. In contrast, a modern audience would see less significance to this particular murder, so they would not have this expectation and could easily miss these clues that the night is stormy. Soon after Duncan's murder, Shakespeare explicitly states that the night was more than just stormy, through Lennox saying "Our chimneys were blown down [...] strange screams of death [...] dire combustion [...] Some say, the earth was feverous and did shake" (2 iii 46-53). This is likely intended to reinforce the Elizabethan audience's belief that killing the rightful king was disastrous, while for the modern audience it might highlight that betraying and murdering anyone is wrong. Words such as 'dire', 'strange', 'screams' and 'feverous' are all emotive, with negative connotations, and add to these effects on each audience. Eventually, though, the modern audience may realise the significance of the king's murder in particular, when Shakespeare has Ross say "By th'clock 'tis day and yet the dark night strangles the travelling lamp" (2 iv 6-7). This tells the audience that the sun has not risen when it should, which is highly surprising to both an Elizabethan and modern audience. Additionally, when Banquo is murdered, the only effects on the rest of the world are given when Banquo says, "It will be rain tonight" (3 iii 18), which shows the modern audience that most murders are not nearly as significant as that of the rightful king. In addition to the effect of murder on the world as a whole, Shakespeare also illustrates the effect of murder on the individuals involved.

When compared to a modern audience, Shakespeare's audience would be more inclined to believe in witchcraft and other superstitions, so they would likely perceive the personal aftereffects of murder differently. After murdering Duncan, Shakespeare hears voices in his head. This is made apparent when he says "Methought I heard a voice cry 'Sleep no more: Macbeth does murder sleep'" (2 ii 38-39). This is an example of how Shakespeare presents his character's thoughts, feelings, and experiences verbally, rather than through expressions, music, timing, and special effects, as a modern film or play might. In this case, it would appear to an Elizabethan audience that this voice has a supernatural source, either through witchcraft or from God, so it would be very attention grabbing. A modern audience may also believe that a supernatural source was the intended appearance, but would additionally think it was simply Macbeth's imagination, and caused by his having committed murder. A modern audience would also be very used to the idea of unnatural beings pronouncing curses in stories, and find witches comical, so this line would be far less attention grabbing. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth also report other strange happenings in this scene, such as when Lady Macbeth asks, "Did not you speak?" (2 ii 16) to which Macbeth replies "When?" or when Macbeth says, "I could not say 'Amen' when they did say 'God bless us'" (2 ii 31-32). Again, to a Shakespearean audience these would likely seem of supernatural origin, given the worldwide turmoil that the murder of the rightful king would cause. In contrast, a modern audience would likely interpret these happenings as figments of the characters' imagination, and signs that they are already beginning to go mad with guilt. For Lady Macbeth, this is in contradiction to her outward denial of any guilt, which could make the modern audience think her even more treacherous than the Elizabethan audience might. However, the message communicated through these examples – the importance of the rightful king – would likely become clear to the modern audience later in the play, so there would be little difference in the overall interpretation.

Overall, the two audiences' interpretations of the messages and themes in Macbeth would differ when ideas are first presented. However, Shakespeare often repeats and emphasises his messages enough that the audiences end up thinking along similar lines. For example, while the Shakespearean audience generally already expected the rightful king's murder to be disastrous, the modern audience would likely learn that this was the case through watching the play. In order to present these messages, Shakespeare uses language techniques such as emotive and connotative language, and illustrates the characters thoughts and feelings through soliloquies and other verbal reports.

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