[The Gunpowder Plot and Shakespeare’s Macbeth](https://blog.shakespearesglobe.com/post/101835213683/the-gunpowder-plot-and-shakespeares-macbeth)

*It is often said that Macbeth is a comment on The Gunpowder Plot of 1605. Our Research Team have done some investigating and have found some interesting connections that could prove that this is true.*

Shakespeare’s ‘Scottish Play’ was probably written in 1606, just three years after James I was crowned as Elizabeth’s successor, and so undoubtedly seems to be paying homage to the succession of the Scottish King to the English throne. But within that time, in November 1605, the Gunpowder Plot had been discovered: the plan to blow up the Houses of Parliament, kill James and replace him with a Catholic monarch failed and the plotters were tortured and horribly executed. The impact of the event was so dramatic that we still remember it today on Bonfire Night, so we can only imagine the enormity of the event for Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

**Why are the Gunpowder plot and Macbeth connected?**

Firstly, many of Macbeth’s themes resonate with the attempted revolt: it’s a play about treason, the overthrow of a King, and the downfall of his murderers. Even more importantly, King James was commonly believed to be descended from Banquho the thane of Lochquhaber, the historical counterpart of Shakespeare’s Banquo, the friend who Macbeth betrays and has murdered. With this in mind the witches’ prophesy that Banquo’s ancestors will be kings takes on a new meaning: it is referring to Banquo’s ancestor James Stuart, King of Scotland and England. By extension, it has been suggested that the escape of Fleance, Banquo’s son, from Macbeth’s murder plot is designed to echo James’s own escape from the Gunpowder plot and to subtly compliment the House of Stuart as legitimate and truly-descended rulers.

*‘The Witches show Macbeth the Descendants of Banquo’ by Henry Fuseli*

**Further evidence…**

There is a scene at the beginning of Act 2, Scene 3 where a porter amuses himself by pretending he is the gatekeeper of hell, letting in new arrivals. He exclaims:

Knock, knock! Who’s there, in the other devil’s name? Faith, here’s an equivocator that could swear in both the scales against either scale, who committed treason enough for God’s sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven. Oh, come in, equivocator.  
(*Macbeth* 2.3)

The insistent reference to equivocation seems to be alluding to the Catholic priest Henry Garnet, who was hung, drawn and quartered for his role in the Gunpowder Plot and was deeply criticised for equivocating. Allegedly, Garnet had heard confession from Robert Catesby, one of the plotters, which revealed his intention to kill the King, but obeyed the Seal of the Confessional by keeping it secret. Jesuits were particularly associated with equivocation, which is a way of avoiding the sin of lying by implying something untrue through ambiguous phrasing. Garnet’s defence of equivocation was extremely damaging in his trial, and the porter’s light-hearted remarks seem to be playing on popular derision of the priest.

Interestingly, it is also through equivocation that Macbeth is tricked to his downfall: when the witches tell him he ‘shall never vanquish’d be until/ Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill/ Shall come against him’ and that ‘none of woman born/ Shall harm Macbeth’ (4.1) they imply that he will always be safe, as both ideas seem impossible. The witches’ deception may well be intended to be resonant of the deceptions of Catholicism and Garnet: when Macbeth is told that the wood is moving he realises he must ‘begin/ To doubt the equivocation of the fiend,/ That lies like truth’ (5.5).

*Macbeth’s* allusions to the sensational events of the Gunpowder Plot and its aftermath are typical of Shakespeare’s often reserved way of referring to topical issues, but leave a fascinating insight into a contemporary dramatist’s response to the momentous event.

**Further reading**

Fraser, Antonia, *The Gunpowder Plot: Terror and Faith in 1605,*(London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1996)

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