

Macbeth and the Gunpowder Plot

James Shapiro discusses equivocation and the politics in his book 1606.

On 5 November, 1605, two-and-a-half years after King James VI of Scotland ascended the English throne, a group of disaffected Catholic gentry plotted to blow up the House of Lords, hoping to kill the King, eliminate the nation's religious and political elite, and reverse the Protestant Reformation begun under Henry VIII. Thousands of Londoners would also have died in the explosion and ensuing fires. The Gunpowder Plot reverberated powerfully through the following months, as the conspirators were captured, tortured, tried and then publicly executed. It's less well known that after the plot failed there was a short-lived armed uprising in Warwickshire. The plot and its aftermath in the Midlands touched close to home for William Shakespeare: some of his Catholic neighbours were implicated, as his hometown abutted the safe-houses where the plotters met, weapons for the intended uprising were stored, and a supply of religious items for the hoped-for restoration of the old faith were hidden. That the 'fifth of November' is still commemorated to this day – though no attack occurred and only its perpetrators died – suggests that it touched something deep within the culture, something that Shakespeare found himself grappling with in his next play, *Macbeth*.

The manhunt that followed the thwarted attack was accompanied by a search for documents that might shed light on the conspiracy. A month after the plot was discovered, a document *Treatise of Equivocation* instructing Catholics on how to lie under oath – was found in a suspect's lodgings. The authorities were especially horrified by one of the techniques recommended in the document, which came to be known as 'mental reservation': when your words and thoughts were at odds, though the person with whom you were speaking could have no idea that this was the case. This sort of equivocation meant saying, for example, 'I didn't see Father Gerard...' while finishing the sentence in your head with the words '...hide himself upstairs in the attic.' It wasn't a lie exactly, if you believed that God knew your thoughts. Yet if this wasn't a lie, what was? A contemporary succinctly described how this doctrine, once widespread, would lead to chaos.

It's difficult to read this sort of despairing Jacobean vision and not think of Scotland under *Macbeth*, a nightmare world where words contradict intentions and honest exchange is no longer possible. In 1606, the word 'equivocation' was infamous and universal recognised as meaning to conceal the truth by saying one thing by deceptively thinking another. *Macbeth*, a play about the assassination of another Scottish king, is rife with equivocation or talk of it, most famously in the Porter scene. Equally when *Macbeth* and Banquo first encounter the Weird Sisters, and the third promises him he 'shalt be king hereafter'; they then tell Banquo 'Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none.' All true but equivocal, insofar as they withhold vital information (they don't tell *Macbeth* that he'll have to kill to do it, or Banquo that he won't be alive to see it). In the dangerous world of the play, even the virtuous characters – including Malcolm and *Macduff's* wife – must equivocate if they hope to survive. The more that equivocating becomes habitual for *Macbeth* the more reassurance he demands from the Weird Sisters, who in turn play upon his hopes and further equivocate, summoning apparitions who urge *Macbeth* to 'Be bloody, bold and resolute,' since 'none of woman born

/ Shall harm Macbeth'. At the last, after learning that Macduff is not of woman born, Macbeth reflects a final time on how equivocation has destroyed him. Alone among Shakespeare's tragic heroes, Macbeth is denied a dying, self-revealing speech; the last we hear from him in way of reflection are these hard-earned insights into understanding the dangers of equivocation.

Macbeth is a play written in the wake of what we would now call a failed terrorist attack, at a time when the nation was grappling with issues of union as well as the imagined threat posed by a maligned religious minority, Macbeth continues to speak to our own unsettled and equivocating times.

1. What happened two and half years into James I's reign?
2. If the plot had been successful what would have happened?
3. What do you think would have been the impact of this failed attack on people in London / Uk?
4. What document was discovered in the manhunt following the attacks?
5. What was 'mental reservation'. What problem does it create?
6. In 1606 what did audience's understand 'equivocation' to mean?
7. Name three ways equivocation appears in Macbeth?
8. What is Shakespeare suggesting about equivocation?