Macbeth Context Notes:

James I and the Daemonologie

King James (the monarch when Macbeth was written and first performed) became utterly convinced about the reality of witchcraft and its great danger to him, leading to trials that began in 1591. James was convinced that a coven of powerful witches was conspiring to murder him through magic, and that they were in league with the Devil.

James published a study of witchcraft, titled Daemonologie.

He personally interrogated the ‘witch’ Agnes Sampson. He was astounded when she privately revealed to him the words he and his wife had spoken in bed together on the first night of their marriage. James ‘swore by the living God that he believed all the devils in Hell could not have discovered the same’.

James I’s fascination with – and hatred for - witches was well known, and no doubt Shakespeare composed Macbeth in 1605 or 1606 to please his new king.

The Great Chain of Being

The Elizabethans believed in "The Great Chain of Being". This was the idea that everyone was ordered by God into his allotted place, with the king at the head.

By killing the king and taking his place, Macbeth was subverting this natural order. Disorder in nature reflects the disorder in human affairs (the macrocosm reflects the microcosm).

The Divine Right of Kings

The Christian kings of Europe once believed they were answerable to no one except God. This idea became known as the divine right of kings.

The divine right was an ancient idea that began with Europe’s medieval kings. They claimed that they had been chosen by God and were his representatives on Earth. These kings had absolute power and could do as they liked. They expected total obedience from the people they ruled.

The Gunpowder Plot of 1605

The Gunpowder Plot was a failed assassination attempt against King James.

Disgruntled Catholics planned to blow up the House of Lords. Guy Fawkes was discovered guarding their horde of explosives in the basement of the House of Lords on November 5, 1605. (“Remember, remember the 5th of November.”)

The traitors were sentenced to death, and this day is still celebrated in England as Guy Fawkes Day.

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.