

regarding the publication of his plays, especially the politically dangerous ones.<sup>51</sup>

At the time of the Gunpowder Plot, the dramatist could not run the risk of presenting on stage a Catholic priest (or a religious man, belonging to a Catholic order), as he had done in his earlier plays.<sup>52</sup> All this explains why the old man, who blesses Macduff, Ross, and all those who join the good cause, is so mysterious and charismatic.

As to the general message of *Macbeth*, it is most significant that Shakespeare's fictitious old man, soon after the murder of King Duncan, lets his audience know that the darkness—the one in *Macbeth* and, we might add, the one in Shakespeare's own time—will not endure forever. It is Macduff who—together with Malcolm and his followers—will finally kill the tyrant Macbeth so that Scotland will be free again. He leaves it, however, to Malcolm, the new and just Scottish king, to call home those of his countrymen who “fled the snares of watchful tyranny” (5.8.67) and to pass judgment upon Macbeth as being a “dead butcher” (5.8.69).

Shakespeare's well-trained spectators, whether they were Catholics or Protestants, who had seen many history plays on the London stage, would have known that the presentation of past history in the theater was meant, as Ribner phrased it, as “an analysis of contemporary affairs”, that “past political disaster” could and should serve “as an aid to Stoical fortitude in the present”, and that the “happy ending” of most tragic distant events could be thought of as a manifestation of a “rational plan” in human affairs, affirming “the wisdom and justice of God”.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 322–25.

<sup>52</sup> In *As You Like It*, for example, the usurper, who comes to destroy the community of exiles in the forest of Arden, meets a religious man (a Catholic monk) and is immediately converted by him. As a result, the exiled senior duke and his whole community of exiles are free and can go home again. This is what Shakespeare obviously hoped for in the case of the actual historical community of English Catholic exiles, some six or seven hundred people, who lived under similar conditions in Flanders. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 156–57.

<sup>53</sup> Ribner, *English History Play*, p. 26.

As demonstrated in this essay, there is a close, often well-concealed interplay between Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and the political and religious events of the early Jacobean age, confirming that Shakespeare was not just a “bystander in all the events leading from the Essex Rebellion to the Gunpowder Plot”.<sup>54</sup> The dramatist singled out the monstrous life and reign of the medieval Scottish king Makbeth, which he adapted for his own purposes, thus highlighting the many parallels with his own age. Resorting to the distant time and place of medieval Scotland, Shakespeare aimed at criticizing the failures and deficiencies of Jacobean England, in particular the policy of oppression toward Catholic subjects by James I, king of Scotland and king of England.

<sup>54</sup> Milward, *Shakespeare the Papist*, p. 205.