**To what extent did Shakespeare write Macbeth in order to portray the importance/ sacred nature of Kingship?**

**Divine Right of Kings**

Religious thinkers in the Middle Ages had upheld the idea of ‘The Great Chain of Being’. This was the belief that God had designed an ordered system for both nature and humankind within which every creature and person had an allotted place. It was considered an offence against God for anyone to try to alter their station in life. After death, however, all would be raised in the kingdom of heaven, if they respected God’s will. Since royal rank was bestowed by God, it was a sin to aspire to it. This doctrine – a convenient one for King James – was still widely held in Shakespeare’s day. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/higher/english/macbeth/background/revision/1/>

**Depiction of Duncan as Macbeth’s binary opposite**

Duncan is portrayed in a number of ways, primarily as an agent of good but frequently as Macbeth’s binary opposite. We understand the true horror of Macbeth’s actions in exploring the opposition inherent within the portrayal of these two characters.

**Depiction of Duncan as a righteous and virtuous King**

* **“this Duncan… his virtues will plead like angels… against the deep damnation of his taking off.”**

Personification of “virtues” alluding to the Christian belief that our deeds will be our champions on the Day of Judgement implying that Duncan was a righteous and honourable King whose murder was the sinful killing of a good Christian.

Simile presenting his virtues pleading “like angels” depicts the holy nature of his actions. The value of his virtues is such that their pleading will have an angelic power, evidently a more powerful testimony to the moral strength and praiseworthy nature of Duncan than the mere pleading of a human tongue.

The alliterative and plosive effect of “deep damnation” reveals both Macbeth’s frustration and possible bitterness at this evidence of Duncan’s goodness and his knowledge that the regicide will result in eternal punishment. Macbeth goes into Duncan’s murder knowing the ultimate outcome and consequences. His actions are premeditated, independently decided and therefore even more heinous.

Juxtaposition of “angels” and “damnation” creates a binary pair again highlighting through extreme contrast the difference between the inherent goodness of Duncan and by extension his good Kingship and the cursed reign of Macbeth to come.

**Duncan as a representative of the faith and gifted with the divine right**

* **“Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope/ The Lord’s anointed temple, and stole thence/ The life o’ th‘ building!”**

Use of superlative “most” indicating the extreme nature of the action coupled with adjective “sacrilegious” implying the killing of Duncan is not simply unlawful but also profane, a sin against God.

Personification of “murder” as a thief who has robbed Duncan’s life indicates that Macbeth has stolen from God himself- not just the Kingship but God’s chosen mortal to rule on Earth.

Double entendre with “temple” as it implies that Duncan’s head has been cut open, a profane act as that very “temple” has been anointed with divine favour. But also as “temple” is a place of worship, it symbolises Duncan as representative of the faith itself. The breaking and entering of this sanctified place, represents an attack against the faith.

**Depiction of Duncan’s death as a crime against nature**

* **“His silver skin laced with his golden blood,/ And his gashed stabs looked like a breach in nature”**

Sibilant “silver skin” creates a tone of softness, even from Macbeth, the beauty of the image recreating Duncan’s regal state such that even as a corpse his skin appears constructed of a precious metal. His tone is awed, even reverential, his hyperawareness of Duncan’s divinely gifted royalty is evident here.

Verb “laced” appears almost decorative, a design on his skin, gently lying on it, again the gentle beauty of it perhaps harking to Macbeth’s earlier mournful remorse “Wake Duncan with thy knocking, I would thou couldst.”

Emotive yet exaggerated descriptive noun phrase of Duncan’s “golden blood” again reminding the audience of his regal status but also depicting Duncan almost as an angel himself made of both precious metals and light. Macbeth is under no illusions that he has committed a heinous act.

The horrific juxtaposition of the plosive verbs “gashed stabs” and “breach” with the angelic image that precedes it creates a binary pair that succeeds in throwing Macbeth’s vicious act into sharper relief. We, along with Macbeth, realise the extent of Macbeth’s actions because of the stark contrast between Duncan’s corpse and what has been done to it. “gashed stabs” further depicts the savagery with which Macbeth attacked the defenceless old Duncan and whilst the murder was committed off stage, this recount by the murderer himself is more telling than perhaps Macbeth intended. Macbeth incriminates himself with each fabricated phrase and encapsulated within the contrast is his awful knowledge of the consequences of his crime. Here, Macbeth’s savagery can be viewed as the ultimate triumph of his id over both ego and superego. Macbeth, as a seasoned warrior, has no need to kill a defenceless sleeping man with such savagery. This vicious depiction places Macbeth even further away from redemption.

The simile “like a breach in nature” signifies that Macbeth knows he has transgressed against the natural order as decreed by God and supported by society. A “breach” is a forceful entry and alluding to “nature” indicates that he knows that the death of Duncan has opened the doors to the chaos of the supernatural.

**Depiction of Duncan as representative of order**

* **Lennox: “The night has been unruly” (Act 2 scene 3)**

Personification of “night” with the adjective “unruly” implying the sudden lawlessness of what is usually a constant- the onset of night. The disruption here clearly represents the doors opening to chaos and indicates the King’s close ties to the land alluding to a belief evident in Arthurian legend but also some pagan beliefs that the health of the King is reflected in the land.

* **Lennox: “strange screams of death” (Act 2 scene 3)**

Sibilance in “strange screams of death” is a harsh sound and perhaps echoes Duncan’s death cries. Macbeth murders him in his sleep which means he doesn’t have a chance to cry out his betrayal in reality, but his tie to the land and order creates an almost mystical connection which gives voice to the horror on a wider basis. It also reminds the audience of the sounds that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth heard in the immediate aftermath of the murder bringing back the tension from that earlier scene which had been dispelled by the porter and his bawdy humour.

* **Lennox: “prophesying with accents terrible/ Of dire combustion and confused events” (Act 2 scene 3)**

Verb “prophesying” reminds us of the witches and their power of prescience and perhaps indicates that with the murder of Order as represented by Duncan, Chaos has been unleashed as represented by Macbeth. Another binary opposite, the sheer waywardness and disorder in the night and the fact that the events are bizarre enough to be commented on serve to throw into stark relief the unnatural state Scotland now occupies. A semantic field of disorder is created through the adjectives “terrible”, “combustion” and “confused”, reflecting how order has been turned on its head.

* **Lennox: “Some say the Earth/ Was feverous and did shake.” (Act 2 scene 3)**

Multiple references to the effect of Duncan’s death on the land. Personification of “Earth” alludes to its sickness, “feverous” and “shake” suggest the Earth is ill, although the symptoms could indicate poisoning or disease. Either way, the sickness is once again linked to the intimate connection, the pagan belief, between King and country.

* **Ross: “darkness does the face of Earth entomb/ When living light should kiss it” (Act 2 scene 4)**

Juxtaposition of “darkness” and “light” creates a binary pair reflecting the unnatural gloom covering Scotland. Evidently, Duncan represents the light and goodness as the King gifted with divine grace. Further juxtaposition of “entomb” and “living”, indicates the darkness shrouding Scotland almost as if the country has been buried, perhaps alive. The “kiss” of “living light” alludes to the fairy tale trope of a fair maiden being awakened with a kiss implying the “darkness” is an evil curse that can be broken.

* **Ross / Old Man: “Duncan’s horses… eat each other.” (Act 2 scene 4)**

The literal cannibalism of Duncan’s prized horses is grotesque and unbelievable. The symbolism could be implying the metaphorical cannibalism in Macbeth’s actions- he usurps Duncan’s power and authority, both are men of great stature in Scotland and both are on the same side. By stealing Duncan’s throne, Macbeth becomes a cannibal, swallowing Duncan’s power to make it his own.

* **Malcolm: “It weeps, it bleeds, and each new day a gash/ Is added to her wounds.” (Act 4 scene 3)**

Later in the play Macduff and Malcolm discuss the state of Scotland though the personification of it being despairing and wounded. The verb “weeps” creates a piteous image, we can envision Scotland being brought to the brink of despair as it cries for what is being inflicted upon it.  The semantic field of injury with “bleeds”, “gash” and “wounds” implies that what Scotland suffers is no longer an illness but it is being attacked with life threatening wounds being inflicted upon the defenceless country. The fact that this state is reached after the death of the rightful King Duncan reflects the slow deterioration of order and its usurpation by Chaos. Moreover it presents the consequences to the country of a bad king, Macbeth.

**Depiction of Duncan as naive and trusting**

The play opens with the defeat of the Norwegian army aided by the **“merciless Macdonwald—/ Worthy to be a rebel”** and **“that most disloyal traitor,/ The thane of Cawdor”**

Interestingly, we are never given a name for the Thane of Cawdor just a descriptive noun phrase, **“disloyal traitor**”, that links the title with betrayal from the very first act.

When Duncan ironically declares: **“No more that thane of Cawdor shall deceive/ Our bosom interest”**, it foreshadows Macbeth’s betrayal but also reveals Duncan’s gullibility.

Is Shakespeare suggesting that Duncan deserves his fate? Or is he purposefully setting up Duncan as the binary opposite to Macbeth even to this extent? Macbeth as paranoid, suspicious and untrusting and Duncan as open, honest, generous and forgiving. Shakespeare presents Duncan as the extreme opposite of Macbeth even to the point of naïve gullibility in order to present the starkest of binary opposites. There can be no doubt in the audience’s mind that Duncan, despite his weaknesses, is righteous BECAUSE his weaknesses are actually virtues.

**Macbeth as a comment on the continuing reign of King James I**

As Shakespeare’s only ‘Scottish Play’ it seems an obvious reference to King James’ roots and its appearance just 3 years into his reign ensures the audience are all aware of its deeply political pro monarchy message. Arguably, Shakespeare is paying his respects to the Scottish King’s succession. The discovery and foiling of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605 and its attendant conspiracy to replace James with a Catholic King all occurred within that time and its impact on society was enormous. Shakespeare encapsulates many of these underlying societal fears based on religion and superstition and he repackages them through his use of the supernatural and the divine in order to present a harder hitting message. DO. NOT. KILL. THE. KING.

**Thematic and historical links**

The key themes in the play all revolve around protecting the Kingship: it is about treason, overthrowing/ usurping a King and his authority and the eventual downfall and demise of the traitors.

The lineage of the King is also presented a important. King James was believed to be descended from a man named Banquho, the thane of Lochquhaber, the fictional Banquo’s historical counterpart. Here, the witches’ prophecy that Banquo “wilt get Kings” alludes to this noble lineage and Fleance’s escape assures the continuation of the line that will produce James. His escape further echoes James’ own escape and survival of the Gunpowder plot and confirms his legitimacy on the throne.

**King James and Witchcraft**

King James I has expressed, through his *Daemonologie* and the sermon on *Revelation*, to believe that “the kingdom of evil lies very close to Christendom” (Jack, 175). The witches and the influence of the supernatural in Macbeth perhaps indicates the monarchy’s deep fear of treason. King James’ parents were both killed in regicides, James himself suffered from multiple attempts on his life.

When Lady Macbeth advises Macbeth to “look like the innocent flower but be the serpent under’t”, it is an ironic reference to a medal that was awarded following the downfall of the conspirators. It depicted a snake hidden amongst flowers to represent the threat of betrayal from within the ranks of the aristocracy. It further alludes to the biblical story of the temptation of Eve and implies humanity’s trusting nature as virtuous but vulnerable.

**The Porter as Gatekeeper of Hell**

The Porter character announces, “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” in act 2 prior to Duncan’s body being discovered.

Here, we clearly see an allusion to the religious motivation of the gunpowder plotters. They believe committing treason for the greater Catholic good is worth committing the cardinal sin of murder, highly ironic considering the gentle message of Christianity. Arguably we are seeing an early terrorist attack.

Interestingly, Macbeth’s deterioration, his increasing paranoia leading to further tyranny is actually what leads to his downfall just as the conspirators taking that step towards damnation through committing a cardinal sin leads to theirs.

**The Decapitation of the Damned the Restoration of the Righteous**

Macbeth’s beheading at the end of the play carries similarities with the fates of the Gunpowder plotters. Their heads were placed on spikes outside the parliament buildings and whilst we have a fairly fixed view on the relative bloodthirstiness of the Jacobean people, the grim sight of the lifeless heads would have sent a powerful message to further would-be traitors to James and the government.

Shakespeare even has Macbeth fear the threat of treason. In Act 3, he speaks of his paranoia, crying, “[o]h full of scorpions is my mind” and he envies Duncan’s state claiming that “treason has done his worst” and “nothing can touch him further”. This reference to the ever present fear a monarch lives under is perhaps Shakespeare’s attempt to honour King James and suggest the difficulties of Kingship. It is ironic that Macbeth, prior to murdering Duncan, muses on the “bloody instructions, which, being taught, return to plague the inventor” indicating that Macbeth knows he is opening a doorway. By showing people that murder and treason can result in the rich rewards of Kingship, he implicitly teaches others to do the same and ultimately suffers the same fate. Whilst the regicide of Duncan as rightful and righteous ruler is cause for damnation and the overturning of the natural order, the regicide of Macbeth holds the power of restoration as Malcolm takes his rightful and righteous place as Duncan’s chosen successor.

**Final Thoughts**

* Kingship is presented as sacred role and trust: the King is representative of the faith, order and the divine right; his death is a crime against nature and the triumph of chaos over order
* Duncan is Macbeth’s binary opposite even to the extent of portrayal as a naive, too trusting King
* Treason is both a crime and a sin and results in a “deep damnation” there is no coming back from
* However, there are political implications and this entire text can be viewed as a piece of pro-monarchy propaganda designed to disguise Shakespeare’s own Catholic roots, which will probably need its own blog post.