The Gunpowder Plot and ‘Macbeth’ Questions

“Remember, remember!
The fifth of November,
The Gunpowder treason and plot;
I know of no reason
Why the Gunpowder treason
Should ever be forgot!
Guy Fawkes and his companions
Did the scheme contrive,
To blow the King and Parliament
All up alive.”

-The Fifth of November (c. 1870)

The Gunpowder Plot (November 5, 1605) was an attempt to create an explosion to destroy King James I of England and his government. Fortunately, the plot was discovered just in time, and the conspirators (Guy Fawkes being the head conspirator) captured in the cellars of the building with twenty barrels of gunpowder. However, based on the Elizabethan ideals about monarchy of the time, to kill the King was to commit a crime against heaven.

This plot would have been on the mind of the original audience of “Macbeth”, and it certainly was an influence on Shakespeare while he was writing it. In fact, some scholars believe that “Macbeth” was a direct response to what would happen if the Gunpowder Plot had been successful. Thus, when King Duncan in the text is killed, there is a domino effect where things get worse and worse.

There are direct references to the Gunpowder plot in the text:

- Lady Macbeth says “look like the innocent flower, / But be the serpent under’t” which is a reference to a medal that commemorated the discovery of the plot. The medal pictures a serpent hiding in a field of flowers. The original audience would have immediately recognized this reference.

- The porter references Father Henry Garnet, who had lied about his knowledge of the plot. When questioned, Garnet insisted that his perjury was not really perjury because he had lied for God’s sake. For this, he was known as the great “equivocator” and was executed shortly after the play was originally performed. The porter says that:

  “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. O, come in, equivocator.”

Here, the porter suggests that Father Henry Garnet will be a gatekeeper of hell.

Questions:

1) Who was the head conspirator of the Gunpowder Plot?

2) When did the Gunpowder Plot take place?

3) Keeping in mind the Elizabethan ideals about the monarchy, what did it mean to kill a king?

4) True or false: The Gunpowder Plot would not have been on the minds of the original audience who saw ‘Macbeth’?

5) What did the commemorative medal picture on it?

6) What was Father Henry Garnet known as?

7) According to some scholar’s, why was ‘Macbeth’ written?

8) Why did Father Henry Garnet say he did not commit perjury?