



## Significance of the Insignificant

In recent years, some English Literature GCSE and A-Level exam questions have asked students to focus on areas of a set text that perhaps diverge from the "main" thematic or character-based concerns of the text.

It is important teachers note that exam boards make explicit the fact that questions and extracts can come from ANYWHERE IN A TEXT - therefore, skipping over the seemingly insignificant is not necessarily a sensible idea.

Learning time is limited, and it is logical to spend quality time on "key" sections of a text. To that end, we have provided brief analysis of '**insignificant scenes of significance**' for a number of GCSE texts, so that these scenes can be explored comprehensively but efficiently by pupils.

These scenes are also incredibly useful for demonstrating whole text knowledge - whilst key scenes may be rich in material, these brief scenes are excellent for highlighting the development of theme or character, and may even awaken an examiner to a new and original point that hasn't been made by pupils again and again!

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## Ageism in Macbeth

**Macbeth:** That which should accompany old age,

As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,

I must not look to have. (5.3.24-26)

These words in Act Five almost become symbolic of Macbeth's impending death, as our tragic hero admits that time is not in his favour. The notion of age being associated with "honour" and companionship ("troops of friends") sadly elude our tragic hero. However, when considering age and its limitations, this play subtly explores the impending fears and anxieties many experience as they reach "old age".

It is important to first of all note that "old age" as we discuss it as modern scholars is rather different to the concept of age for the Jacobean audience; this play takes place in a Post-Elizabethan time period, where the aged Queen went from being lauded for her youth, beauty and virginity, to increasingly become a symbol of public anxiety due to her inability to produce a suitable (and hopefully male) heir. The derision of the once lauded and adored Queen could link to the role of the older woman in Macbeth, particularly Lady Macbeth.

The relationship between womanhood and witchcraft is palpable in Elizabethan literature. In the art and literature of the time, witches are almost invariably depicted as female. Banquo's commentary on the witches having "beards", as well as questioning their gender identity, reveals not only the gendered Elizabethan conception of witchcraft, but also has suggestions of ageism. Elizabethan patriarchy associated a woman's menstrual cycle with demonic or unclean activity, and their attitude towards menopause was similarly misogynistic; the appearance of facial hair and "beards" on the witches may indicate that these women are not youthful. Therefore, Banquo is arguably mocking their old age, as well as relegating them to the periphery of society. Their appearance becomes a topic of constant derision, with their "withered" appearance becoming part of the main reason for Banquo's distrust. Here, we can begin to dismantle the usually positive, almost saintly interpretation of Banquo, revealing the rampant misogyny of the time.





Lady Macbeth's assertions of having "given suck" has often propelled the theory that Lady Macbeth has given birth and subsequently lost a child; the use of past tense also suggests that Lady Macbeth is past the age of bearing children. This could also help us interpret the clear parallels and contrasts between herself and Lady Macduff. Whilst both women are the wives of powerful thanes, the powerful Lady Macbeth is a dramatic foil to the overtly maternal Lady Macduff. The repeated motif of her being surrounded by children, who become collateral alongside her during Macbeth's tyrannical reign, only seem to emphasise her more youthful appearance and innocent role. On the other hand, Lady Macbeth's confidence has often been lauded for her subversion of gender roles; however, her status is also linked to that of motherhood – a role that eludes her over the course of the play. As discussed earlier, the arguments that link lady Macbeth with witchcraft could also align with the idea of her being an older woman, reinforcing her association with the witches.

Finally, Macbeth's own fears of his "barren crown" also lay claim to his own fear of aging. The innocent infant Fleance becomes the "serpent" he must abolish, showing his relative fears of the limitations of his age and the lack of time in which he must accomplish his desired kingship.

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