Here are several topics enabling you to write about *Macbeth* and related texts with close attention to language -- Shakespeare's, and in topics 2 and 3, Garson's and Stoppard's. Your thesis should be strong and definite and responsive to the question(s) you address. Key prompts are identified with a ☛. Sources are referenced MLA-style in "Works Cited" at the end.

1. Gendering character, engendering action

Approach *Macbeth* as a dramatic poem about the connection between gender and action -- the actions of key characters and their motivations as expressed in the play's language and imagery. ("Engendering" can mean causing or effecting something; it can also mean "marking" by gender.)

 Writes Janet Adelman,

> In the figures of Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, and the witches, the play gives us images of a masculinity and a femininity that are terribly disturbed; this disturbance seems . . . both the cause and the consequence of the murder of Duncan. (93-94)

And, she might add, of the other crucial actions performed in the play. Stephen Greenblatt explores these gendered characters thus:

> There is something uncannily literal about Lady Macbeth's influence, as if marital intimacy were akin to demonic possession . . . If there is sexual disturbance out on the heath, where the bearded hags stir the ingredients of their hideous cauldron, there is deeper disturbance at home, in the murderous intimacy of the marriage bond. . . . If you are worried about losing your manhood, it is not enough to hunt for witches: look to your wife. ([more at] Norton 1473-74)

Most generally, the language as well as the action of *Macbeth* is saturated with gender-related, gender-specific, and gender-bending features, making up a text that says things about good and evil, political legitimacy and tyranny, kingship and rebellion and revenge *in terms of* "terribly disturbed" images and ideas of masculinity, femininity, physical nature, and human personhood.

☛ Write an essay in which you account for the “gendering” of character and the “engendering” of action in terms of the language (figurative, literal, image-charged and imageless) of the play. The core question here may be: what drives the Macbeths on their fierce pursuit of power, legitimacy, security, and survival -- and what helps to doom them? Don't neglect implied assumptions about the “natures” of men and women and the “nature” both of what is natural and what is unnatural, but show how these assumptions are complicated, reversed, and dramatized in the rich and vivid language of this play.

Here's another touchstone passage – by a major American writer and activist whose book on motherhood has left its mark on several generations of readers. (That the book's title, *Of Woman Born*, alludes to *Macbeth* is not irrelevant to our study of Shakespeare in the modern era.)
Woman has always known herself both as daughter and as potential mother, while in his dissociation from the process of conception man first experiences himself as son, and only much later as father. When he begins to assert his paternity and to make certain claims to power over women and children on that basis, we begin to see emerging the process through which he compensated for – one could say, took revenge for – his previous condition as son-of-the-mother.

Patriarchal monotheism . . . stripped the universe of female divinity, and permitted woman to be sanctified, as if by an unholy irony, only and exclusively as mother . . . — or as the daughter of a divine father. She becomes the property of the husband-father . . . . If he is to know “his” children, he must have control over their reproduction, which means he must possess their mother exclusively. The question of “legitimacy” probably goes deeper than even the desire to hand on one’s possessions to one’s own blood-line; it cuts back to the male need to say: ‘I, too, have the power of procreation – these are my seed, my own begotten children, my proof of elemental power.” In addition, of course, the children are the future receivers of the patrimony . . . . (Rich 118-119)

2. Macbeth, Macbird

Think of Barbara Garson's play Macbird (1966-67) as a complex metaphor or complex of metaphors in which key episodes of U.S. politics of the 1960s are compared to – talked about in terms of – Shakespearean texts, above all Macbeth. It may be called a species of the "mock-heroic" genre, in which a base or trivial subject is satirized by being compared to a noble or memorable narrative. (We've seen a bit of this in Brecht's Arturo.) But the comparison may well cut both ways: the base subject may be exalted in importance by comparison, while the noble narrative may be debased or parodied by the comparison (Murfin and Ray 217).

.Write an essay in which you show how Macbird's metaphorics work to subvert the legitimacy not just of the Johnson and Kennedy presidencies but of mainstream U.S. politics and leadership of the 1960s. Who is satirized, and how? What's the net effect on the political institutions they represent? Who, if anyone, comes out on top of the satiric warfare? And if Macbird parodies the Shakespearean original, "cutting both ways," how does that further its immediate satiric purposes?

Here are a few notes on particular allusions to American politics in Macbird, keyed to pages in our Macbird text. See the document

5-6. Robert and Ted Kennedy were eventually to become U.S. Senators. On JFK's election Robert was named Attorney General (p. 15). In 1966-67, when Macbird! was written, Robert was thought to be maneuvering for the nomination to succeed Johnson in 1968.

28. that rebel isle is Cuba, where American-backed forces attacked at the Bay of Pigs shortly after JFK's inauguration in 1961.


47. the Earl of Warren. Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren, who headed the Commission investigating JFK's assassination that found that a lone gunman did it.


58. flowers by the roadside. First Lady Lady Bird Johnson distinguished herself by particular attention to highway beautification.

54. the Wayne of Morse. Wayne Morse, Senator from Oregon, opposed the war in Viet Nam ("Viet Land") from an early date.

78. Burn baby burn and caldron bubble. In the background of much of the witch action are the Watts, L.A. riots of August 1965.
93. chickens coming home and roosting. An oblique glance at Malcolm X’s remark on JFK’s assassination: "chickens coming home to roost."

Robert Kennedy was assassinated in Los Angeles in June of 1967, after the play was finished.

3. Dogg’s Hamlet, Cahoot’s Macbeth and the languages of the stage

Is Shakespearean language a problem today (for viewers, readers, learners, users)? Is it alien or alienating? Is it obscure, too archaic and difficult for anyone but rote learners and English teachers (and Tory politicians) to understand? Tom Stoppard has the solution. To "set off" Shakespearean language and to stress its complexity and its resourcefulness, he has invented yet another language to set beside the English of Hamlet and Macbeth and the modern English (or Czech) spoken by (some of) the characters in these two plays. That language is Dogg, and he explains (some of) its principles in his Preface.

☛ Write an essay in which you show how Dogg works, in contrast to or in place of other stage languages, to dramatize the uses of Shakespeare and of theatrical language in the two cultures represented in these plays — to answer the question "What good is Shakespeare (or theatre)?" Some questions seem to lead toward such a showing: Does Dogg "work" in the same ways in the two plays? Does it "stand for" particular languages or dialects within those plays? Does it represent the "same" language across both plays, or does its function change between them? Does its nature change even within each play? Who uses it? Who fails to understand it? Who learns it, and with what results? Again, finally, what does the existence of a new stage language in the existing clash of languages in these plays really mean for those more familiar languages?

4. Dogg’s Hamlet, Cahoot’s Macbeth: authority, East and West

Macbeth and Hamlet are both plays about authority (social, political, cultural). They address such questions as these: Who rules? By whose choice, and by what right? Through what cultural instruments? And by what means (fair or foul) have rulers come to rule and maintain their authority. In Dogg’s Hamlet, Cahoot’s Macbeth, Tom Stoppard takes on such questions in two divergent societies in the era of the Cold War — and plays with them, using the Shakespearean texts to raise interesting questions about political and social authority if not to answer them. ☛ Write an essay in which you show how Stoppard uses elements of Hamlet and Macbeth to mirror and question the legitimacy of ruling elites in the West and in the East in 1979-80. Show how the “mapping” of relationships of political power and social class onto the Hamlet and Macbeth plots helps to clarify OR to amusingly complicate stock responses to Cold War conflicts. You don’t have to find in this pair of plays Stoppard’s definitive judgment on ideological conflict, but you should show in detail how the odd meshing of Shakespearean plots with political and social relationships sets in motion a play that has something to say about that key idea, “authority.”
Works Cited


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I cite these works to acknowledge my sources. Do not feel you need to consult additional secondary sources in order to do this assignment. But whenever you use ANY sources, you must acknowledge them with full and specific references in the text of your essay and in a “Works Cited and Consulted” list. -- SD