

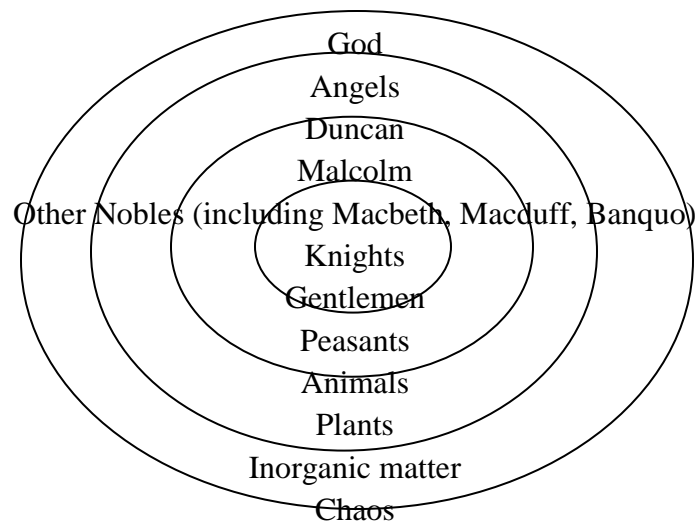
The Universe: An Elizabethan View

Elizabethans believed in an absolutely ordered universe in which all things could be clearly ranked in order of superiority. This “common sense” view corresponded with their religious beliefs, political system, and limited scientific understanding. General Being could be divided and ranked as shown in the column at right:

Within these individual categories, further subdivisions could also be made. For example, the sun was the superior planet, the lion the highest animal, gold the chief metal, and men were superior to women. “Man” could be subdivided and ranked as shown in the column at right, and each subdivision could be further subdivided.



Macbeth reflects the Elizabethan concern with seeing and maintaining order. In Act I, the universe is clearly ordered. The civil unrest aided by Norway has been stopped, and people enjoy relative prosperity in Scotland under the reign of a respected and loved king.



When Macbeth kills Duncan between scenes 1 and 2 of Act II, he violates the natural order of the world, which is not restored until the end of the play. Thus, killing the king is not just a personal nor just a social action; it is a cosmic crime, and the universe reflects the disorder Macbeth initiates. Shakespeare depicts this disorder through the use of pathetic fallacy, animal imagery and diction.