



William Shakespeare

Macbeth

CONTEXT

The shortest of Shakespeare's tragedies, *Macbeth* is in some ways a problem for critics. It was written during the same period in which Shakespeare composed *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*, and while on the surface it doesn't seem to have the tragic depth of these other plays, its treatment of the supernatural theme in some ways is both simpler and more complicated. Probably first performed in 1606, Shakespeare's primary source for the play was Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, where he found two historical figures that contributed to his *Macbeth*. These were the 10th century Donwald who murdered King Duff and the 11th century Macbeth who killed King Duncan in battle. At that time in Scottish history, murder was not an uncommon way of succeeding to the throne, and for anyone taking power by that means, retaining it invariably involved bloodshed. Holinshed describes King Duncan as too gentle and unwilling to take the harsh measures necessary to rule and Macbeth as wanting in gentleness but lacking none of the courage or will to do what had to be done.

SUMMARY

The play opens with a brief appearance by the three Weird Sisters who make a tryst to meet on the heath and there to greet Macbeth. They exit in concert on one issue: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." The scene immediately shifts to King Duncan and his sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, who are just receiving word that the two rebellions of Macdonwald and Norway have been defeated by Macbeth and Banquo. In gratitude, the King announces that Macbeth is to be given the title taken from his defeated enemy, the traitorous Thane of Cawdor.

Meanwhile, following the battle, Macbeth and Banquo head across the moor to meet Duncan. There they are met by the Weird Sisters, who prophesy that Macbeth will be first Thane of Cawdor and then King and Banquo will be the father of kings. Both men are taken aback, but the witches vanish before they can be questioned further. The two men are even more amazed to meet two of Duncan's men, who tell Macbeth that he has been made Thane of Cawdor. With the first part of the prophecy fulfilled, Macbeth is

drawn to the second and is immediately overcome by horrible imaginings. He puts them aside, but in the next moment, upon learning that Duncan has made Malcolm Prince of Cumberland and thus first in line for the throne, he sees the King's action as a stumbling block in his path to the throne. Macbeth sends his wife a letter telling her of the witches' prophecies and his newly acquired title.

When Macbeth returns from the field to greet his King, Duncan receives him with the words, "I have begun to plant thee" (I, iv, 28) and then makes plans to visit Macbeth at his castle at Inverness. Macbeth goes on ahead of him to make arrangements. Lady Macbeth has given serious thought to her husband's letter and sees the coming visit of the king as fortune delivering him into their hands. She sees the same thoughts in her husband's face but fears he will not have the resolve to carry them out. She tells him to leave all to her. Her plan is to get Duncan's chamber servants so drunk that they will know nothing of the murder and then cover them with blood so that the murder will be pinned on them. She overcomes all of Macbeth's objections, and Macbeth carries out the murder that night. When the murder is discovered the following morning, Macbeth kills the chamber servants, attributing it to his uncontrollable wrath. The King's death has an unsettling effect on everyone, and Malcolm and Donalbain, fearing for their lives, flee to England and Ireland. Suspicion falls on Duncan's sons after they flee, and Macbeth is swiftly named King.

Macbeth has no sooner begun his reign than he is overcome with fear of Banquo, whom the Weird Sisters prophesied would be father to a line of kings. The thought that he has sold his soul for a throne that will belong not to his sons but to Banquo's shakes him utterly. He arranges with two cutthroats to murder Banquo and his son Fleance and thus circumvent the Witches' prophecy. At a banquet on the night of the intended murders, he receives word that the assassins have done away with Banquo but that his son Fleance escaped. In the banquet hall, as if in mockery of his plans, Macbeth finds Banquo's ghost sitting in the King's chair. Lady Macbeth's scorn for the apparition does not prevent his visible fright from ending the banquet. Following the banquet fiasco, two lords quietly discuss their hopes that Macduff's leaving for England will mean relief from the growing strain and madness of Macbeth's reign.

The scene shifts to a field where Hecate, who is the mistress of the witches, reprimands the Weird Sisters for their incompetence and for acting without her consent. She reminds them that Macbeth will "spurn fate, scorn death, and bear his hopes 'bove wisdom, grace, and fear" and that their real leverage is elsewhere because "security/ Is mortals' chiefest enemy" (III, v, 1-33). That night Macbeth comes to the Weird Sisters. He cannot live with the uncertainty of the outcome of his actions—he wants "security"—and demands answers to his questions. The Sisters summon four apparitions. None of them will be questioned, but each makes a pronouncement: 1) Beware Macduff; 2) no man born of woman shall harm Macbeth; and 3) Macbeth cannot be beaten until Birnam Wood shall come against him on Dunsinane Hill. The fourth is silent, showing only Banquo and a line of kings. The oracular nature of the apparitions convinces Macbeth of his invulnerability, and he leaves the hut. Presently, he is informed that Macduff has fled to England and he realizes that he has moved too slowly against him, that Macduff can make

alliances with Malcolm in England. He resolves not to hesitate again and orders that Macduff's wife and family be slaughtered.

The scene shifts to England where Macduff is urging Malcolm to take up arms and return to claim his father's throne and release Scotland from Macbeth's cruel and bloody reign. Malcolm tests Macduff's loyalty by telling him that he would be a more unjust king than even Macbeth. When he is convinced that Macduff truly serves the good of Scotland, Malcolm reveals the test, telling Macduff that the King of England is ready to support them in their efforts against Macbeth. Word arrives of the slaughter of Lady Macduff, their children, and their entire household, and Macduff's grief crystallizes in a determination to kill Macbeth himself.

Meanwhile, in Scotland, the doctor of Lady Macbeth witnesses the sleepwalking that the Queen's lady-in-waiting has told him occurs nightly. Both doctor and servant are deeply disturbed by what they see and hear. Macbeth appeals to the doctor to heal his wife's diseased mind, but the doctor tells him that her illness is "beyond my practice": "more needs she the divine than the physician" (V, i, 54-69).

Word comes that the English forces are approaching, ten thousand strong. Macbeth dismisses the impending siege with a scornful laugh. He has done too much, experienced too much horror to be fearful now. Word comes that Lady Macbeth is dead, and for a moment the meaninglessness of his life seems to overwhelm him. The next moment word comes that Birnam Wood is moving toward the castle, and as the prophecy that he had depended on for his security now betrays him, he is stirred to action. He easily kills young Siward and then faces Macduff, the man whose family he slaughtered. Macbeth tells him to put up his sword because he cannot be harmed by any man born of woman. When Macduff tells him that he was not born of woman but "was from his mother's womb untimely ripped," Macbeth realizes how completely he has been betrayed by the witches. In a spirit reminiscent of the courage and honor he had before encountering the Witches and killing Duncan, he refuses to surrender or be humiliated and engages Macduff in single combat. Macduff kills him, and the play ends with the head of Macbeth being carried aloft on a pike and Malcolm acclaimed as King, establishing a new rule in Scotland with the support of the English.



Things to Think About

1. Be aware of the political situation characterizing Scotland at both the beginning and end of the play. The play opens with Scotland in the throes of rebellion. The Scottish lords have made alliances with foreign powers to overthrow King Duncan: Macdonwald's revolt is supported by the Irish—the "kerns and gallow-glasses" (I, i,

13)—and the Thane of Cawdor is giving assistance to Norway (31-58) in its efforts at encroachment. The play ends with a new stability coming to Scotland when Malcolm takes the throne with the help of the English. How much of all that happens in between can be understood in light of the superstitious practices of the Scots, the readiness of figures like Macbeth and Banquo to consort with dark spiritual powers, in contrast to the English, who seem more level headed?

2. Shakespeare writes *Macbeth* during what is called his “dark” period, the period in which he wrote *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Lear*. Each of these plays deals with a spiritual evil so great it destroys the people in the regime in which it operates. In each of these plays the destructive forces are largely from without, even if they work their way into the hearts of the tragic heroes. How is *Macbeth* different? How does Macbeth’s response to his encounter with the supernatural differ from that of Hamlet, or his response to evil differ from that of Othello or Lear?
3. Keep in mind the confusion brought to the moral order by the Witches, who make no moral distinctions: “Fair is foul, and foul is fair.” They are nihilists and nominalists: no moral categories exist for them; all is chaos. In their world, words function in a strange way because they don’t refer to anything having a fixed form or nature. Consider Macbeth in light of this backdrop: he acts in ways that are contrary to reason and to the existence of moral categories and yet he wants to control time and the outcome of events. In what ways is he an image of modern man?
4. The world of sorcery and witchcraft is played out against an implied Christian world view. Macbeth’s taunting challenge to one of the murderers—“are you so gospelled/ To pray for this good man....” (III, i, 88) assumes not only a belief in Christian values but a softness to them that Macbeth can exploit for his own purposes. And the Captain assumes a similar world view, in the beginning, when he relates the battle to King Duncan and likens it to “another Golgatha” (I, ii, 40). Set against these darker pronouncements are the words describing the English King, Edward the Confessor. His healing of “evil” and his powers of prophecy are in stark contrast to those of the witches. Keep in mind the way religious or spiritual values in Scotland are imperfectly assimilated or at odds with each other, and the difficulties this creates for political stability in Scotland.
5. Be aware of Shakespeare’s treatment of masculine and feminine roles, the explicit and implicit definitions of what is masculine and feminine beneath his treatment. It is impossible to speak of what is unnatural without some notion of what is natural. In what ways do Macbeth and Lady Macbeth realize their sexual natures, in what do they go contrary to them? What about the Witches? How are they related by their sexual nature to the world they act upon?
6. Also be aware of the way the weather and supernatural events mirror the chaos on stage. We see a similar treatment in *Julius Caesar*, *King Lear*, and, in a lighter vein, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Shakespeare uses this device, a form of extended metaphor or allusion—sometimes called the “pathetic fallacy”—much as a modern

director uses music. What does Shakespeare help us see and feel by means of this device that he could not without it?

7. Terms:

Western Isles: Hebrides (islands off the coast of Scotland; and possibly Ireland)

Kerns and gallowlasses: Irish bush fighters and Irish infantrymen.

Thane: the ancient title of a Scottish lord.

Hecate: an ancient Greek goddess who originally served as an attendant to Persephone, Queen of the underworld; she was associated with black magic and was said to send ghosts and demons out wandering at night and kept company with the souls of the dead.



Study Questions

1. Opening lines are often emblematic of the whole work in Shakespeare's plays. For a first time reader who doesn't know the outcome of the play, what do the opening lines reveal or suggest about what is already happening or what is to happen?
2. Who is the King of Scotland at the beginning of the play?
3. Who is the Thane of Cawdor at the beginning of the play and with whom is he allied?
4. What are the objections that Macbeth offers his wife against committing the murder (I, vii)?
5. In most of the scenes involving the witches, the Weird Sisters are involved in some kind of strange occult activity, some form of magic. Identify some of their activities and the body parts they work with.
6. When Banquo first greets the Witches, he is taken by their asexual or their unnatural bisexual appearance—their appearance, like their language, is equivocal. What characteristics in the women lead Banquo to respond as he does?
7. How do Macbeth and Banquo respond to the Witches' prophecies, at the time when they hear them and shortly afterwards when they meet Angus and Ross, who confirm the prophecies with the news that Duncan has made Macbeth Thane of Cawdor?
8. Shortly after their victory and before leaving for Inverness, Duncan says, "We will establish our estate upon/ Our eldest, Malcolm, whom we name hereafter/ The Prince

of Cumberland...." (I, iv, 37-8). Why does Shakespeare have Duncan do this at this moment? What is Macbeth's response to the news?

9. Who says and with what meaning or implication, "Yet I do fear thy nature./ It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness"?
10. Just after murdering Duncan, Macbeth hears knocking at the gate and looking at his hands, says,

*Whence is that knocking?
How is't with me, when every noise appals me?
What hands are here? ha! they pluck out mine eyes.
Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red.*

What is the meaning of these lines? What do they reveal about Macbeth at the moment?

11. Who is the first to suspect Macbeth of the murder of Duncan (III, i, 1-10)?
12. What do Malcolm and Donaldbain do upon learning of their father's death? Where does each of them go? What do we learn about them from their actions?
13. Having grasped at power by killing his King, Macbeth finds he has only taken the first step necessary to acquire the power and control he desires. What is the next obstacle he has to overcome?
14. At the Banquet in Act III, Macbeth learns that Banquo has been dispatched. In order to successfully carry out his plans for the throne, Macbeth has to have perfect control over events. What is the unsettling news he receives during the banquet, and what light does it throw on the course of action ahead of him, on his efforts at perfect control? Are there any ironies to the moment?
15. During the Banquet, Banquo's Ghost appears. How does Macbeth and Lady Macbeth respond to the Ghost's appearance? What do we learn about each from their response?
16. From the Banquet scene where Macbeth says, ironically, "Come, we'll to sleep" (III, iv, 142), we shift to an open heath again and the Weird Sisters. What does Hecate have to say to her three crones when she finds out what they have been up to with among the Witches? From this scene, what do we learn about order and authority? And what is the meaning of Hecate's saying, "all you have done/ Hath been but for a wayward son,/ Spiteful and wrathful, who, as others do,/ Loves for his own ends, not for you"?

17. In Act IV, Macbeth goes to the Weird Sisters to get answers for the uncertainties he still faces. He wants to get some grasp of a "deed without a name" (IV, i, 48) and conjures them by speaking the following lines (notice their incantatory, formulary rhythms, like those associated with spell-casting):

*I conjure you, by that which you profess,
Howe'er you come to know it, answer me:
Though you untie the winds and let them fight
Against the churches; though the yesty waves
Confound and swallow navigation up;
Though bladed corn be lodged and trees blown down;
Though castles topple on their warders' heads;
Though palaces and pyramids do slope
Their heads to their foundations; though the treasure
Of nature's germins tumble all together,
Even till destruction sicken; answer me
To what I ask you.*

What do we learn about Macbeth and his relationship to nature from this conjuring?

18. In response to Macbeth, the Witches conjure a number of apparitions. How many and what does Macbeth learn from them (IV, i)? Be able to identify what is presented in each.
19. Macbeth changes over the course of the play. When the play opens, he is a courageous warrior who is respected as a man who loves his country and serves his king. Following Duncan's murder, and Malcolm and Donalbain's flight, he is quickly named King. What do the people think of him after he becomes king and over the course of his reign? How do you know? Ground your answers in the text.
20. When Macduff seeks Malcolm's help in England, he is tested by the young heir. How does Malcolm test Macduff? What does he do to insure he can trust him? How do the actions which Malcolm takes distinguish him from his father, the late King, and do his actions give us any indication of the kind of king he will be?
21. A doctor interrupts the meeting between Malcolm and Macduff, telling the two men that the English King, Edward the Confessor, will shortly meet them. He gives information that is elaborated on by Malcolm. What do we learn about the English King in this scene?
22. When Macbeth left the Weird Sisters last, he felt himself to be invulnerable. He was told he could not be defeated unless Birnam Wood moved against him at Dunsinane. It does now. How (V, iv)?

23. Who is Young Siward, what happens to him and with what significance? Shakespeare never romanticizes evil.
24. When Macbeth meets Macduff in combat, he discovers that the words of the Second Apparition have a different meaning from the one he gave them. What does Macbeth learn in this encounter?
25. How do we know that Malcolm will establish a new order under his reign (IV, iii, 91-94; V, viii, 62-75)?
26. Identify the following quotes by speaker and context or significance:

*"My way of life
Is fallen into the sear, the yellow leaf,
And that which should accompany old age,
As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but in their stead
Curses not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not."
"I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
And dashed the brains out...."*

*"But there's no bottom, none,
In my voluptuousness. Your wives, your daughters,
Your matrons, and your maids could not fill up
The cistern of my lusts... The king-becoming graces,
As justice, verity, temp'rance, stableness,
Bounty, perseverance, mercy, lowliness,
Devotion. Patience, courage, fortitude,
I have no relish of them..."*

*"She should have died hereafter;
There would have been a time for such a word.
Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing."*

*"Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts. Unsex me here,*

*And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood;
Stop up th' access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose nor keep peace between
Th' effect and it" (I, v, 38-45)*

*"Were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly: if the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases
We still have judgment here; that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague the inventor: this even-handed justice
Commends the ingredients of our poison'd chalice
To our own lips... Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against
The deep damnation of his taking-off;
And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind. I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on the other."*

*"The time has been
That, when the brains were out, the man would die,
And there an end. But now they rise again...
This is more strange
Than such a murder is."*

*"What man dare, I dare:
Approach thou like the rugged Russian bear,
The arm'd rhinoceros, or the Hyrcan tiger;
Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves
Shall never tremble: or be alive again,
And dare me to the desert with thy sword;
If trembling I inhabit then, protest me
The baby of a girl. Hence, horrible shadow!
Unreal mockery, hence!"*

*"That way the noise is. Tyrant, show thy face!
If thou be'st slain and with no stroke of mine,*

*My wife and children's ghosts will haunt me still.
 I cannot strike at wretched kerns, whose arms
 Are hired to bear their staves: either thou, Macbeth,
 Or else my sword with an unbatter'd edge
 I sheathe again undeeded. There thou shouldst be;
 By this great clatter, one of greatest note
 Seems bruited. Let me find him, fortune!
 And more I beg not."*

27. Macbeth attempts to control too much; he is driven by a lust for power and once he murders Duncan he believes he can bring under his control all consequences that follow from his act. What the play demonstrates is that he cannot; each new act carries with it consequences that spiral out of control. His final hubris is shown when he goes to the Witches thinking that with the answers he gets from conjured apparitions he can control the future. In what ways does *Macbeth* speak to our age and its insistence on associating knowledge with power: the more we know, the more power and control over a thing we have?
28. *Macbeth* is a play whose action involves a nearly perfect intertwining of the natural, political order with the supernatural. In this sense, it speaks to Pope John Paul's call in *Fides et Ratio* to reconcile faith and reason. The justice that is achieved at the end brings both political and religious disorders back into order. But how is this done? What actions are taken in the political order that are necessary to right Scotland not only within its own social-temporal sphere but in the religious, supernatural sphere as well?
29. If there is a grace working at the end of all of Shakespeare's tragedies—and so one working here in *Macbeth*—does that fact change the way we perceive violence in our world? Might there be some grace working in a violent event that as it's reported in the newspaper only horrifies? If a major purpose of newspapers is to sell, and they can sell by highlighting violent, scandalous, or shocking events, will we ever develop a sense of seeing in those events what we learn to see in *tragedy*? Do a reflection on the different powers of apprehension and feeling developed in newspapers and in Shakespearean tragedy. Which shows us more? Which has the greater power for clarifying vision and ordering emotions? Be able to justify your position with good use of texts.



Questions on Language and Form

1. As we've noted before, one of the structural devices Shakespeare uses to give coherence and meaning to his plays is antitheses, his setting one place or regime off against another, one group of characters against another, one philosophy against

another, or even, in some instances, one plot-line against another. The mind learns by comparing and contrasting. By placing two things in clear thematic relation to each other, Shakespeare allows us to see more clearly the values or meaning of each. In *Macbeth*, the plot develops by means of a number of antitheses. I mention two here, both explicitly religious: the first is the opposition set up between the supernatural order of the Weird Sisters and the divinely sanctioned political order of the English King, Edward the Confessor. The second is the contrast between the spiritual practices of the Weird Sisters—the Black Masses they perform, the prophetic utterances they make—and the traditional Christian practices of which they are implicit parodies—the prophetic teachings of the Church, its Mass and its sacraments. Work out the thematic implications of these two antitheses in the play. What are they and what light do they throw on Macbeth, on Scotland, and on the England that comes in at the end in support of Malcolm and Macduff?

2. What does Lady Macbeth's sleep walking scene (V, i) accomplish? How does it function in the play and what is its effect on the audience?



Reflection Questions

1. Try to imagine *Macbeth* without the witches. If Shakespeare had written the story and left them out, what kind of a story would it be? What would it lose? How would the removal of the witches change our understanding of *Macbeth*, Scotland, and the intervention of England? Now put the witches back in. What does the play gain?
2. Reflect on what *Macbeth* tells us about the nature of evil. Identify evil in the play. Where do you see evil desire? Evil *intent*? The *will* to do evil? How do these elements of evil relate to each other? And do we see any characters use their wills to resist evil? Can those whose wills are evil really achieve the ends they set out to achieve?
3. In *Macbeth* as in all of his plays, Shakespeare shows himself to be fully aware of what today we would call *realpolitik*. He rarely sentimentalizes violence, within war or outside of it. Drawing on the text, do two things: reflect first on both the horrors that are committed in the play, in the political and supernatural worlds, as well as the innocence that is lost. Then secondly, reflect on the difference between legitimate authority and tyrannical authority. Duncan is a good King, Macbeth a tyrant. Duncan demonstrates justice, gratitude, generosity, and graciousness in his brief appearance, but he also seems too trusting, too credulous in the face of evil. Macbeth demonstrates an over-reaching ambition, deceit, paranoia, ruthlessness, and vindictiveness. Set your reflections on these two men against similar reflections on Malcolm in IV, iii where the future King describes not only the qualities that would make a King bad but those that would make him good. What does Malcolm have that neither of the other two has?