

Why the Story of MacBeth?

When Shakespeare wrote *MacBeth* in about 1605 or 1606, King James had just succeeded Elizabeth I on the English throne. James had been the King of Scotland, so Shakespeare is telling the story of one of Scotland's early kings. King James was a patron of the arts and he had doubled the amount of money paid to actors and playwrights, playing before the Royal Court.

MacBeth is a Scottish nobleman who, because of his ambition to become King, murders the rightful ruler of Scotland, Duncan. He then kills another nobleman, named Banquo, because some witches prophesy that Banquos descendants will be kings. [Banquo was actually an ancestor of the Stuart kings--like King James.] So, Shakespeare was paying a compliment to James and his ancestors, by making Banquo a hero.

Witches and Ghosts. The witches in *MacBeth* are horrible and demon-like. James I was interested in witches because Agnes Simpson (a witch) supposedly tried to wreck his ship, as he sailed to Denmark to marry his new bride. She confessed to this before being condemned to death. James I wrote a book on witchcraft called Demonology. The witches in the play are creatures of the devil who cause MacBeth to commit murder.

The Gunpowder Plot. Treason (attempting to overthrow the king or government) was very popular when Shakespeare wrote *MacBeth*. In November, 1605, Guy Fawkes and other Roman Catholics planned to blow up the houses of Parliament. They wanted to put a Catholic ruler on the throne. They were tried and killed as traitors. Shakespeare and many people of the day sided with the King. Therefore, a play about a villainous traitor was very topical.

Creating the Mood. *MacBeth* is a tragedy, whereby the main character dies. A brave and noble man is changed into a murderer/traitor because of his ambition to become King of Scotland. In the end he is killed by the people loyal to the rightful king. Most of the story takes place at night, creating a menacing mood. The witches appear from nowhere and they dance around a cauldron. Fogs, mists, and wild storms create threatening atmosphere. MacBeth's bloodstained hands and the appearance of Banquos ghost frighten the audience. Lady MacBeth's sleepwalking helps the audience share her guilt.

MacBeth

"The prince of darkness is a gentleman." (III, iv, 147)

"Chief Rowland to the dark tower came.
His word was still, Fie, foh, and fum,
I smell the blood of a British man." (III, iv, 185)

"The worst is not
So long as we can say, "This is the worst." (IV, i, 27)

"As flies to wanton boys, are we to th' gods,
They kill us for their sport." (IV, i, 36)

"It is the stars,
The stars above us, govern our conditions." (IV, iii, 34)

"Ay, every inch a king." (IV, vi, 110)

Gloucester. "O, let me kiss that hand!"

Lear. "Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality." (IV, vi, 134)

"Men must endure
Their going hence, even as their coming hither:
Ripeness is all." (V, ii, 9)

"Howl, howl, howl, howl! O! you are men of stones;
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so
That heaven's vault should crack." (V, iii, 259)

"Her voice was ever soft,
Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman." (V, iii, 274)

"Vex not his ghost: O! let him pass; he hates him
That would upon the rack of this tough world
Stretch him out longer." (V, iii, 315)

"The oldest hath borne most: we that are young
Shall never see so much, nor live so long." (V, iii, 327)

MACBETH

Critical Commentary. In 1603, James VI of Scotland became James I of England, succeeding the late Queen Elizabeth. Shakespeare, being a consummate man of the theater with a sharp eye on the box office, decided to write a play that would both interest and, perhaps, flatter the new monarch. In Holinshed's *Chronicles*, Shakespeare found the story of a Scottish king, Macbeth, who was a contemporary of Edward the Confessor, King of England from 1042 to 1066, and the immediate predecessor of William of Normandy. But Macbeth, a villain turned king, would hardly flatter James I. And so, Shakespeare added to Holinshed's fairly sketchy "chronicle" the character of Banquo, James's ancestor, and the "dumb show" of the Eight Kings with its suggestion of other Stuarts to follow. The original version intended for the Globe Theater was severely trimmed down, and this shortest (and best constructed) of all his tragedies was presented at Court forthwith.

King James was properly impressed and flattered, not merely because the usurper-king, Macbeth, was duly killed in the end, but also because the several key appearances of the three Witches in the

play appealed to his own authoritative interest in witches. (He had written *Demonology* in 1597.) The general audience was likewise highly edified by Shakespeare's generous use of witches, ghosts, and the supernatural in general.

But *Macbeth* is more than an "occasional" play. It is a study of excessive ambition; of the struggle "between good and evil angels for the soul of man" (as in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*); of a wife who pushed her husband beyond the limits of legality and morality out of love for him; of the consequences that follow when a host violates the sacred law of hospitality by killing the guest in his house.

The play is actually *all of the above*, as well as the story of a noble, respectable hero who yields to evil out of impatience with anticipated advancement. The play is also the story of Lady Macbeth, who for a while chooses the course of evil to expedite her husband's advancement, only to be stricken with serious remorse later on, as shown by her self-accusatory sleepwalking scene and her subsequent suicide. She is no ordinary unsexed female monster, as Macbeth is no ordinary, feckless villain.

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare has on the very human level told the story of two middle-aged people who are very much in love with each other, but who have also chosen to pursue a course of evil to advance their *shared* ambition. The conflict in the play is not between Macbeth and the three Witches, who chose to advise him in ambiguous terms, but between Macbeth and his conscience. The knocking at the gate (II, ii, 66) is Macbeth's very own conscience. "To know my deed 'twere best not know myself," says Macbeth. "Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst!" After that, the road for Macbeth can lead only downward.

Source. Holinshed's *Chronicles*.

Synopsis

Act I. The supernatural tone of the play is set at the very opening with the appearance of the three Witches who will control Macbeth's actions and ultimate fate. About to cross a heath, Macbeth and Banquo, having recently repulsed the rebellion of Macdonwald and the Thane of Cawdor against King Duncan, are accosted by the witches, who hail Macbeth as Thane of Glamis (which he already is), Thane of Cawdor, and King thereafter. For Banquo they prophesy that he shall be the father of kings, but not a king himself. The witches' prophecy begins to take on credibility when messengers from King Duncan hail Macbeth as Thane of Cawdor, to succeed the defeated and soon-to-be-executed rebel thane. The King also names Malcolm as his immediate heir to the crown, a move that immediately generates in Macbeth a plan to kill the King. Upon receipt of this bundle of news in a letter from Macbeth, Lady Macbeth vows to help her sometimes reluctant mate to realize his ignoble ambition. When Duncan and his sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, arrive to spend the night in Macbeth's castle, the stage is set for initiating the plan.

Act II. Aided by Lady Macbeth's planning and encouragement, Macbeth drugs the King's protective grooms and kills Duncan in his sleep. The next morning, the murder is discovered by Macduff, come to call on the King. Macbeth pretends to be both humiliated and outraged at the murder of his illustrious guest, and to divert any suspicion of his complicity in the crime, kills the grooms. Malcolm and Donalbain, however, do suspect Macbeth, and they flee from Scotland. Macbeth, as next of kin, is crowned King.

Act III. Macbeth arranges a lavish banquet at Dunsinane, to which Banquo and the other nobles are invited. But Banquo, says Macbeth, knows too much for Macbeth's safety, and he is ambushed and killed on Macbeth's orders; Banquo's son, Fleance, escapes, however, and this portends bad luck

(the turning point of the play, in effect) for the bloody usurper. At the banquet, Macbeth heaps great praise on the absent Banquo and is soon unnerved when the ghost of Banquo appears (unseen by all the others present, including Lady Macbeth) and takes the place at the table reserved for him. Macbeth almost exposes his own guilt with wild protestations of his innocence, and is spared for the moment when the coolheaded Lady Macbeth suggests that the guests leave the temporarily "indisposed" King. For about eleven years now Macbeth has been ruling Scotland with the hand of a bloody tyrant. His spies are everywhere, and fear is rampant throughout the kingdom. Now the news is that Malcolm has been joined by Macduff against the King, and Macbeth is impelled to visit the three Witches once more for advice and guidance. They are already planning Macbeth's further decline with Hecate, Queen of Evil.

Act IV. Inside the witches' cavern, Macbeth demands to know what is further in store for him. Their answer comes forth in a parade of three apparitions: (1) an armed head, warning him to beware Macduff; (2) a bloody child promising Macbeth that "none of woman born" can harm him; (3) a child crowned and bearing a tree and promising Macbeth absolute protection until Birnam Wood should move to Dunsinane. (Macbeth's relief is temporary, because immediately afterwards he is confronted with a show of eight kings and the smiling ghost of Banquo, their progenitor.) Despite these reassurances, Macbeth decides to take further action, namely, to order the murder of Lady Macduff and her children now that Macduff has joined Malcolm in England preparatory to mounting a resistance move against Macbeth. The news of the extinction of his family reaches Macduff in England, and he, as the "instrument of retribution," resolves to overthrow the tyrant.

Act V. Back at Dunsinane, Lady Macbeth is having very disturbing second thoughts about her complicity in Macbeth's violent murder of Duncan. She walks and talks in her sleep, rubs her bloody (to her) hands repeatedly, and appears to be beyond any help a doctor can give her. Worried over his wife's condition, Macbeth nevertheless proceeds with the preparations for repelling the *legitimate* forces under Malcolm and Siward. Those forces are now approaching Birnam Wood and, as part of prescribed military strategy, camouflage themselves with boughs cut from trees and bushes. The *third* of the witches' latest prophecies has thus come to pass. The next piece of bitter news to reach Macbeth is that his wife has died, presumably a suicide. But Macbeth has no time to mourn and prepares to die in battle, if necessary. First, he kills young Siward, the son of the elder Siward accompanying Malcolm. Then Macduff confronts the overconfident Macbeth, but the King is soon depressed by Macduff's revelation that he had been delivered by Caesarian section (so much for the *second* of the witches' prophecies). Macbeth fights on half-heartedly and is slain by Macduff. The tyrant's head is presented by Macduff to Malcolm, now the undisputed King of Scotland.

Key Quotations. First Witch: "When shall we three meet again
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?"

Second Witch: "When the hurlyburly's done,
When the battle's lost and won." (I, i, 1)

"Nothing in his life
Became him like the leaving it; . . ." (I, iv, 7)

"There's no art
To find the mind's construction in the face: . . ." (I, iv, 11)

"Yet do I fear thy nature;
It is too full o' the milk of human kindness." (I, v, 17)

“Your face, my thane, is as a book where men
 May read strange matters. To beguile the time,
 Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,
 Your hand, your tongue: look like the innocent
 flower,
 But be the serpent under’t.” (I, v, 63)

“If it were done when ’tis done, then ’twere well
 It were done quickly; . . .” (I, vii, 1)

“That we but teach
 Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
 To plague the inventor; . . .” (I, vii, 8)

“I have no spur
 To prick the sides of my intent, but only
 Vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself
 And falls on the other.” (I, vii, 25)

“I have bought
 Golden opinions from all sorts of people.” (I, vii, 32)

“I dare do all that may become a man;
 Who dares do more is none.” (I, vii, 44)

Macbeth. “If we should fail,—”

Lady Macbeth.

“We fail!

But screw your courage to the sticking-place
 And we’ll not fail.” (I, vii, 59)

“Is this a dagger which I see before me,
 The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee:
 I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
 Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
 To feeling as to sight? or art thou but
 A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
 Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?” (II, i, 33)

“The bell invites me.
 Hear it not, Duncan; for it is a knell
 That summons thee to heaven or to hell.” (II, i, 62)

“The attempt and not the deed
 Confounds us.” (II, ii, 12)

“Methought I heard a voice cry, ‘Sleep no more!
 Macbeth does murder sleep,’ the innocent sleep,
 Sleep that knits up the ravell’d sleeve of care,
 The death of each day’s life, sore labor’s bath,
 Balm of hurt minds, great nature’s second course,
 Chief nourisher in life’s feast.” (II, ii, 36)

“Infirm of purpose!” (II, ii, 53)

"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." (II, ii, 61)

"Downy sleep, death's counterfeit." (II, iii, 83)

"Things without all remedy
Should be without regard; what's done is done." (III, ii, 11)

"We have scotch'd the snake, not kill'd it." (III, ii, 13)

"But now I am cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd, bound in
To saucy doubts and fears." (III, iv, 24)

"I am in blood
Stepp'd in so far, that should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er." (III, iv, 136)

"Double, double toil and trouble;
Fire burn and cauldron bubble." (IV, i, 10)

"I'll make assurance double sure,
And take a bond of fate." (IV, i, 83)

"Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until
Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill
Shall come against him." (IV, i, 92)

"What! will the line stretch out to the crack of
doom?" (IV, i, 117)

"Angels are bright still, though the brightest
fell." (IV, iii, 22)

"Out, damned spot! out, I say!" (V, i, 38)

"All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this
little hand." (V, i, 56)

"My way of life
Is fall'n 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." (V, iii, 22)

"Cure her of that:
Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas'd . . . ?" (V, iii, 39)

"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." (V, v, 19)

"I 'gin to be aweary of the sun." (V, v, 49)

"I bear a charmed life, which must not yield
To one of woman born." (V, vii, 41)

"Lay on, Macduff,
And damn'd be him that first cries, 'Hold, enough!'" (V, vii, 62)

ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

Critical Commentary. Between *Macbeth* and *Coriolanus* came *Antony and Cleopatra*. Between Julius Caesar and Octavius (later Augustus) Caesar came Mark Antony, the lover turned soldier, the ruler *manqué*. *Antony and Cleopatra* is partly a chronicle history drama "depicting a titanic struggle for domination of the world," and partly a romantic tragedy about the seduction and destruction of a man who had to choose between love and political power. It is yet another of Shakespeare's fascinating case histories, this one about a man who chose to be "passion's slave," rather than a second Caesar.

In *Cleopatra*, Shakespeare found an exotic equal to Othello. He exploited her different, alien, and mysterious qualities with a vigor not to be seen again until the Orientalism of the mid-18th century. Cleopatra is Antony's "serpent of old Nile" and, being an Egyptian, is a blood relation to the gypsies and thus expected to be a deceitful conjurer and magician. (Cf. the obvious parallel with that other "gypsy," Othello, accused by Brabantio of having "practised on her [Desdemona] with foul charms," and enchanted her with tales of the "Cannibals that each other eat, The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads/ Do grow beneath their shoulders.") Shakespeare's audiences were obviously fascinated by strangers and foreigners, even while they secretly feared them.

But Shakespeare shows an interest and appreciation of *this* woman ("Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale/ Her infinite variety," he says of her, and lets his admiration go even farther: "A woman is a dish for the gods") even though she is, in his *rational* "mind's eye" a mere royal whore, the "embodiment of insidious and irresistible appeals to her lover's passion." And so he devotes the whole last act to her catastrophe. "Give me my robe," she says, "put on my crown; I have/ Immortal longings in me." In the end Antony is ruined by his passion for this royal whore with the "immortal longings"; but it is a world well lost because it was all for love.

Sources. Sir Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (1579), and (possibly) Suetonius' *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*.

Synopsis

Act I. In Alexandria, Mark Antony, successor to Julius Caesar as lover of Cleopatra, luxuriates in the Egyptian court. He is impelled to leave the Queen and the easy living when word reaches him of the growing threat to the second triumvirate (Antony, Octavius Caesar, and Lepidus), the defiance