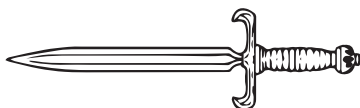


THE TRAGEDY OF
MACBETH

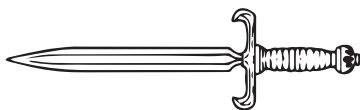
William Shakespeare





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INTRODUCTION

Brian Kohl

Perhaps the most vivid testament to the power of *Macbeth* is that actors consider the play itself bad luck. At least, none of the cast are supposed to mention it by name backstage: instead it's to be called "the Scottish play." And the themes seem to justify this reaction: *Macbeth* is an unhappy and bloody story in which ambition proves to be the harshest master and men's lives little more than the playthings of witches.

The World Around

Although *Macbeth* was actually completed in 1606, three years *after* Queen Elizabeth I's death,* the play is viewed as another product of the Elizabethan Golden Age. This period of history is stuffed with a host of culture-changers, including Edmund Spenser, Shakespeare himself, Sir Francis Bacon, Sir Walter Raleigh, Sir Francis Drake and many other sirs.

But for the English, the dawn of this new century wasn't necessarily a time of optimism. Instead, it was the *end* of an era: Elizabeth left

* Circa 1606 is the date according to most scholars. The source for much of my information about Shakespeare's life is A.D. Cousins, ed., *The Shakespeare Encyclopedia* (Buffalo, NY: Firefly Books, 2009), s.v. "Macbeth."

no heir, and the passing of the last of the Tudors—a line of monarchs that had ruled England for the past 120 years—must have been unsettling. All in all, the transfer of power went smoothly: King James VI of Scotland became King James I in 1603, joining England and Scotland under one ruler at long last. And there were only two serious efforts to get rid of the new king: one by kidnapping (which contributed to Sir Walter Raleigh’s eventual execution much later), and one by explosion (the notorious Gunpowder Plot of November 5th). Both attempts were thwarted. So, compared to the previous struggles associated with succession (e.g., the Wars of the Roses), it *was* a smooth transition.

But in 1606 the rest of the world wasn’t sitting around waiting for Shakespeare’s darkest tragedy. In Spain, Cervantes had just finished *Don Quixote*. In North America, all the European powers were hurrying to get a stake in the New World. Within three years of *Macbeth*’s completion, the English would have Jamestown in Virginia (which is named after Elizabeth, “the Virgin Queen”), the Dutch would have the first European post on Manhattan Island, and the Spanish would have founded Santa Fe.

About the Author

Much of William Shakespeare’s life story must be deduced from other accounts of the period, because Shakespeare left little written record—at least, little beyond his vast contribution to English literature.* He was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, a country town in the middle of England, in 1564—the same year Michelangelo and John Calvin both died.

* A few pariahs have argued that Shakespeare himself was not the author of the plays. Many of these theories are obviously crazy, but the conspiracy theorists among you might enjoy them nonetheless. For example, Joseph Sobran and others reason that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, fits as the author of plays and sonnets much better than a modestly educated country actor. See Sobran, *Alias Shakespeare* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

As a child, he lived through an outbreak of the Black Death and was “classically educated” at the local grammar school. At eighteen years old, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, who was eight years older than he and already pregnant with their first child. After this, he apparently began work as an actor in London. No evidence exists of his playwriting until 1592, when he was blasted by a competitor named Robert Greene, who called Shakespeare “an upstart Crow...[who] supposes he is able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you...”[†] It’s around this time that scholars have dated his first plays—*Henry VI*, *Richard III*, and *Comedy of Errors*. He became quite wealthy, even purchasing some ownership in the Globe Theater. Based on his plays, Shakespeare was a true Renaissance man of life experience, somehow familiar with the noblest courts in Europe and the bawdiest taverns.

Some scandal has attended his work. The Victorians were perturbed enough by his recurrent vulgarity to bowdlerize his plays, and whether his sonnets—many addressed to another man—are homosexual in intent is a debated topic. (Just for the record, C.S. Lewis argued the love in the sonnets isn’t erotic.[‡]) Rumors of other extramarital affairs have persisted, and it doesn’t help that in his will, all he left Anne (after thirty-some years together) was his “second best bed.”[§]

Regardless, Shakespeare died in 1616 with his reputation forever cemented as “the Bard of Avon”—wordsmith of the stories that have been a driving force behind half a millennium of human imagination.

† This quote and other facts about Shakespeare’s life also from A.D. Cousins, ed., *The Shakespeare Encyclopedia* (Buffalo, NY: Firefly Books, 2009).

‡ C.S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (Oxford: Oxford, 1973), 503.

§ Of course, as with most things Shakespearean, we don’t actually even know the true (in)significance of a “second best bed.”

“none of woman born” can kill him, and that he’ll be victorious until Birnam Wood comes against him (pp. 59-60).

Macduff has fled to join Malcolm, but Macbeth murders his wife and son anyways. Lady Macbeth feels the guilt of all this blood, and she loses her sanity even as Macbeth grows more and more paranoid. Malcolm and Macduff enlist the help of the English, and the combined army arrives at Dunsinane, fulfilling the witches’ prophecies.

The play ends with a second traitor beheaded, except this time, of course, that traitor is Macbeth.

Worldview Analysis

Perhaps the most famous line in this play comes after Macbeth is told of his wife’s suicide: “Life,” he says to himself, “...is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing” (p. 86). Of course, if Macbeth means there’s no rhyme or reason to his own story, he’s wrong; he knows that and so do we.

Any attempt to make sense of the sound and the fury should start with Macbeth’s own character. We know more about Macbeth than anyone else—he speaks close to seven hundred lines in the play. (In comparison, the second-most lines go to Lady Macbeth—and she has only about two hundred fifty.) So an important scene where Macbeth *forgets* to talk should stand out to us. But that’s what seems to happen when the generals first encounter the witches (pp. 6-7). Macbeth is twice described as “rapt,” and Banquo is the one who cross-examines the witches. Macbeth doesn’t speak at length until they start to vanish. Afterwards, Banquo (and the readers) wonder if the witches have some ulterior motive. Macbeth starts daydreaming about an “imperial theme” (p. 9). We’d be slightly suspicious if we happened upon three weird sisters on a blighted heath, so what is it that seems to hold Macbeth spellbound?

Macbeth gives us the answer: “I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself, /

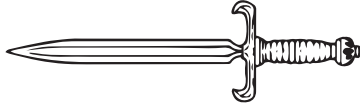
And falls on the other.” Macbeth is hungry for power. Even after Duncan makes him Thane of Cawdor as well as Glamis—better than any other of the noblemen—Macbeth’s ambition won’t let him enjoy it—because Malcolm has been named Prince of Cumberland, heir to the throne, and that this is one more “step” he must fall on or vault over.

Of course, Macbeth’s underlying premise—*more for you means less for me*—is a basic human sin, familiar even to toddlers: it’s called selfishness. It’s true that there can’t be two kings. But the second premise—*I cannot be happy unless I am king*—is flawed. And Macbeth’s conclusion—*therefore I should kill to be happy*—is evil as well as selfish. In that sense, *Macbeth* is a terrifying look at the divine promise that “whoever exalts himself will be humbled” (Lk. 14:11). Once Macbeth prayed, “Stars, hide your fires! / Let not light see my black and deep desires,” he put the wheels in motion, and there was no way to stop them from eventually crushing him—at least, no way to stop *and still be king*. Ambition is a harsh master.

But the power of the play is that Macbeth’s decisions seem reasonable—or at least understandable—until he actually stabs Duncan... and even after that, maybe up to the point where he has Banquo murdered! (After and including that betrayal, Macbeth acts “brainsickly” by any standard, to use this play’s wonderful adverb.) Shakespeare masterfully creates the illusion that assassinating your king *might* be an acceptable option, right up until it happens, and the reader realizes it isn’t acceptable. That’s what makes this play’s atmosphere *feel* so terrifying.

So, how does Shakespeare make us sympathetic to Macbeth? Two ways.

First, he makes Macbeth an admirable character. Before the general turns assassin, his ambition and military prowess are important for a thane to have, and he is good at using force. His king is more pleased with him than any other thane (two holdings, Glamis and



DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Duncan: king of Scotland

Malcolm: his son

Donalbain: his son

Macbeth: general in the king's army

Banquo: general in the king's army

Macduff: nobleman of Scotland

Lennox: nobleman of Scotland

Ross: nobleman of Scotland

Menteith: nobleman of Scotland

Angus: nobleman of Scotland

Caithness: nobleman of Scotland

Fleance: son to Banquo

Siward: Earl of Northumberland,
general of the English forces

Young Siward: his son

Seyton: an officer attending on
Macbeth

Boy: son to Macduff

An English **Doctor**, a Scotch **Doctor**,
a **Soldier**, a **Porter**, an **Old Man**

Lady Macbeth

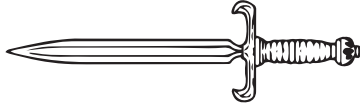
Lady Macduff

Gentlewoman attending on Lady
Macbeth

Hecate and three **Witches**

Lords, Gentlemen, Officers,
Soldiers, Murderers, Attendants,
and **Messengers**

The **Ghost of Banquo** and several
other **Apparitions**



ACT I

SCENE I

An open place. Thunder and lightning.

[*Enter three WITCHES.*]

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.

Third Witch. That will be ere the set of sun.

First Witch. Where the place?

Second Witch. Upon the heath.

Third Witch. There to meet with Macbeth. **First Witch.** I come,
Graymalkin!

All. Paddock calls:—anon:—

Fair is foul, and foul is fair:

Hover through the fog and filthy air.

[*WITCHES vanish.*]

SCENE II

A Camp near Forres.

[*Alarum within. Enter KING DUNCAN, MALCOLM, DONALBAIN, LENNOX, with ATTENDANTS, meeting a bleeding SOLDIER.*]

Duncan. What bloody man is that? He can report,
As seemeth by his plight, of the revolt
The newest state.

Malcolm. This is the sergeant
Who, like a good and hardy soldier, fought
'Gainst my captivity.—Hail, brave friend!
Say to the king the knowledge of the broil
As thou didst leave it.

Soldier. Doubtful it stood;
As two spent swimmers that do cling together
And choke their art. The merciless Macdonwald,—
Worthy to be a rebel,—for to that
The multiplying villainies of nature
Do swarm upon him,—from the Western isles
Of kerns and gallowglasses is supplied;
And fortune, on his damned quarrel smiling,
Show'd like a rebel's whore. But all's too weak;
For brave Macbeth,—well he deserves that name,—
Disdaining fortune, with his brandish'd steel,
Which smok'd with bloody execution,
Like valor's minion,
Carv'd out his passag tTill he fac'd the slave;
And ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseam'd him from the nave to the chaps,
And fix'd his head upon our battlements.

Duncan. O valiant cousin! worthy gentleman!

Soldier. As whence the sun 'gins his reflection
 Shipwrecking storms and direful thunders break;
 So from that spring, whence comfort seem'd to come
 Discomfort swells. Mark, King of Scotland, mark:
 No sooner justice had, with valor arm'd,
 Compell'd these skipping kerns to trust their heels,
 But the Norwegian lord, surveying vantage,
 With furbish'd arms and new supplies of men,
 Began a fresh assault.

Duncan. Dismay'd not this
 Our captains, Macbeth and Banquo?

Soldier. Yes;
 As sparrows eagles, or the hare the lion.
 If I say sooth, I must report they were
 As cannons overcharg'd with double cracks;
 So they
 Doubly redoubled strokes upon the foe:
 Except they meant to bathe in reeking wounds,
 Or memorize another Golgotha,
 I cannot tell:—
 But I am faint; my gashes cry for help.

Duncan. So well thy words become thee as thy wounds;
 They smack of honor both.—Go, get him surgeons.

[*Exit SOLDIER, attended.*]

Who comes here?

Malcolm. The worthy Thane of Ross.

Lennox. What a haste looks through his eyes! So should he look
 That seems to speak things strange.

[*Enter Ross.*]

Ross. God save the King!

Duncan. Whence cam'st thou, worthy thane?

Ross. From Fife, great king;

Where the Norweyan banners flout the sky
 And fan our people cold.
 Norway himself, with terrible numbers,
 Assisted by that most disloyal traitor
 The Thane of Cawdor, began a dismal conflict;
 Till that Bellona's bridegroom, lapp'd in proof,
 Confronted him with self-comparisons,
 Point against point rebellious, arm 'gainst arm,
 Curbing his lavish spirit: and, to conclude,
 The victory fell on us.

Duncan. Great happiness!

Ross. That now

Sweno, the Norways' king, craves composition;
 Nor would we deign him burial of his men
 Till he disbursed, at Saint Colme's-inch,
 Ten thousand dollars to our general use.

Duncan. No more that Thane of Cawdor shall deceive
 Our bosom interest:—go pronounce his present death,
 And with his former title greet Macbeth. Ross. I'll see it done.

Duncan. What he hath lost, noble Macbeth hath won.

[*Exeunt.*]

SCENE III

A heath.

[*Thunder. Enter the three WITCHES.*]

First Witch. Where hast thou been, sister?

Second Witch. Killing swine.