

THE
CONNELL GUIDE
TO SHAKESPEARE'S



MACBETH

“I think these guides are a very exciting way
to encourage people to read great novels,
plays and poems.”

MELVYN BRAGG

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE
PLAY IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by Graham Bradshaw

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Macbeth

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Introduction

Even now, whenever I read *Macbeth*, I cannot forget the terror I felt when I first read it as an eight-year-old boy in Brazil who was certainly no swot, and read anything he could get hold of, including the notorious American horror comics that were banned in Britain and many other countries. The comics were frightening, in their lurid way. But the first act of *Macbeth* seemed like a far more dreadful imaginative summons. I still remember the shock of realizing that blood must reek, or have a smell, and that in Scotland, which must be a very cold country, bloody swords would smoke. I remember my shuddering horror when I guessed, with the help of the word “unseam”, just what it was that Macbeth was doing to Macdonwald when he ripped him open from the navel to the chops – and my incredulity when Duncan’s response was to call this disemboweller of rebels a “Worthy gentleman”! Was the King of Scotland even listening to the terrifying report from the bleeding Captain?

Macbeth may well be the most terrifying play in the English language, but it hasn’t always been seen that way. It has divided critics more deeply than any other Shakespearian tragedy – and the argument, in essence, has been about just how terrifying the play really is and about how we should react, or do react, to Macbeth himself. No Shakespearian

tragedy gives as much attention to its hero as *Macbeth*. With the exception of Lady Macbeth, there is much less emphasis on the figures round the hero than there is in *Hamlet* or *Othello*. Unlike *King Lear*, with its parallel story of Gloucester and his sons, *Macbeth* has no sub-plot. There is little comedy, so little that many find the porter’s scene, the one exception, a jarring addition to the play. And its imagery of sharp contrasts – of day and night, light and dark, innocent life and murder – adds to the almost claustrophobic intensity of this most intense of plays.

So why are critics so divided about *Macbeth*? Why is it such a disturbing play? Why do we feel compelled to admire its hero even as we condemn him? How reassuring is the last scene, when Macbeth is killed and Malcolm becomes king? Do we see this as the intervention of a divine providence, a restoration of goodness after all the evil? Or do we see little evidence of divine providence and instead signs that the whole cycle of violence and murder could be about to begin all over again? And what does the play really tell us about good and evil? This book sets out to answer these questions, and to show how it is only in recent years that the extent of Shakespeare’s achievement in *Macbeth*, and the nature of his vision in the play, has really been grasped.

A summary of the plot

Act One

The play opens in thunder and lightning with Three Witches chanting round a boiling cauldron. A wounded sergeant reports to King Duncan that his generals – Macbeth and Banquo – have defeated the allied forces of Norway and Ireland, led by the traitor Macdonwald. Macbeth and Banquo, wandering on a heath after their victory, meet the Three Witches, who greet them with prophecies. The first witch hails Macbeth as “Thane of Glamis” (his title), the second as “Thane of Cawdor”; the third proclaims he shall “be King hereafter”. The witches tell Banquo he will father a line of kings. When they vanish, a messenger arrives from the King, informing Macbeth he is now to be Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth begins to ponder how he can achieve the final prophecy, and become King. When Duncan arrives to stay at the Macbeths’ castle at Inverness, Lady Macbeth hatches a plan to murder him and secure the throne for her husband. Macbeth agonises, but Lady Macbeth eventually persuades him.

Act Two

Macbeth hallucinates before entering Duncan’s quarters to commit the murder, believing he sees a bloody dagger. After the murder he is so shaken

that Lady Macbeth takes charge, framing Duncan’s sleeping servants, as she has planned to do, by placing bloody daggers in their hands. The next morning, Macduff arrives and discovers Duncan’s corpse. Feigning anger, Macbeth murders the guards before they can protest their innocence. Macduff is suspicious of Macbeth, but does not reveal his suspicions publicly. Fearing for their lives, Duncan’s sons flee, Malcolm to England, Donalbain to Ireland. Macbeth assumes the throne after being elected the new King of Scotland.

Act Three

Macbeth is uneasy about Banquo, and the witches’ prophecy which predicts he will father a line of kings. He hires two men to kill Banquo and his young son, Fleance. The assassins succeed in killing Banquo, but Fleance escapes. At a royal banquet afterwards, Banquo’s ghost enters and sits in Macbeth’s place. Macbeth flies into a rage; a desperate Lady Macbeth tells her guests that her husband is unwell. The ghost departs but when he returns a second time, prompting another display of anger from Macbeth, the thanes flee.

Act Four

Macbeth visits the Three Witches again. They conjure up spirits: an armed head warns him to “beware Macduff”; another spirit, a bloody child,

says “none of woman born/ shall harm Macbeth”; a third, a crowned child, says Macbeth will “never vanquish’d be until/Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill/shall come against him”. Macbeth is told by Lennox, one of the Scottish nobles, that Macduff is in exile in England. Despite this, he sends murderers to Macduff’s castle where they kill Macduff’s wife and their young son. In the long, so-called English scene, Macduff (as yet ignorant of the deaths) is tested by Malcolm, who is finally convinced of his “truth and honour”. Immediately after this, Macduff learns that his wife and son have been murdered.

Act Five

Lady Macbeth, now wracked with guilt, sleepwalks, trying to wash imaginary bloodstains from her hands. As the English army approaches, led by Malcolm, Macbeth learns that many of his thanes are deserting him. While encamped in Birnam Wood, the English soldiers are ordered to cut down branches from trees and to carry them as camouflage, fulfilling the witches’ prophecy. Macbeth delivers a final despairing soliloquy on learning that his wife has died. (The cause is undisclosed but Malcolm later suggests she has committed suicide.)

In the ensuing battle, Macbeth confronts Macduff, saying that he cannot be killed by any man born of woman. But Macduff declares that he

was “from his mother’s womb/ Untimely ripp’d”. Macduff beheads Macbeth offstage and the play ends with Malcolm accepting the throne.

THE CHARACTERS

DUNCAN, King of Scotland

MALCOLM, Duncan’s son

DONALBAIN, Duncan’s son

MACBETH, a general in the King’s army, later king

BANQUO, a general

MACDUFF, LENNOX, ROSS, MENTEITH,

ANGUS, CAITHNESS, nobleman of Scotland

FLEANCE, Banquo’s son

SIWARD, Earl of Northumberland

YOUNG SIWARD, Siward’s son

SETON, personal officer to Macbeth

MACDUFF’S SON

LADY MACBETH

LADY MACDUFF

An English Doctor, A Scottish Doctor, A Sergeant, A Porter, An Old Man, Three Murderers, A Lady-in-waiting, Three Witches, Hecate, Apparitions, Lords, Gentlemen, Officers, Soldiers, Attendants and Messengers

What is *Macbeth* about?

The orthodox or traditional idea is that *Macbeth* is not only a study of “ambition” but a study of “evil”. The director Peter Hall described it in a 1970 interview as “the most thorough-going study of evil that I know in dramatic literature”:

Evil in every sense: cosmic sickness, personal sickness, personal neurosis, the consequence of sin, the experience of sin, blood leading to more blood, and that, in a way, leading inevitably to regeneration. Disease or crime, or evil, induces death, which induces life. *Macbeth* presents this cycle of living and, in that sense, I find it the most metaphysical of Shakespeare’s plays – an unblinking look at the nature of evil in the person and in the state, and in the cosmos.

One would naturally expect such a play to be terrifying, but in the kind of “cycle” Hall so eloquently describes there is light at the end of the terrible tunnel. Evil “induces death, which induces life” and leads “inevitably to regeneration” and a providential restoration of “Order” – the order that *Macbeth* destroyed by killing Duncan, the ‘Holy King’.

Through most of the 20th century, the dominant view concurred with Sir Peter Hall’s: the play’s terrors, while alarming, are safely contained;

Evil is finally exorcized by the triumph of Good. This idea of a reassuringly inevitable or providential intervention was rather like, or all too like, Victor Hugo’s Romantic view of the reasons for Napoleon’s downfall:

The moment had come for supreme incorruptible justice to intervene... Napoleon had been denounced in infinity, and his fall had been decided. He was in God’s way.

Here it’s worth recalling two accounts of *Macbeth* that impressed me when I was a schoolboy. One is John Danby’s book, *Shakespeare’s Doctrine of Nature* (1949), in which Danby compares the “formal outline” of *Macbeth* to the shape of the young Shakespeare’s first historical tetralogy – the three Parts of *Henry VI*, and *Richard III*. In this sequence of plays, says Danby, a Holy King is killed by a murderer who is then forced to rule “with blood and iron, proceeding from enormity to enormity”, until, finally, “the powers of outraged pity and justice” return to overthrow the murderer. Danby’s assumption is that *Macbeth* has a similar moral and even religious framework, a framework in which, once again, “the powers of pity and justice” come out on top, this time in a triumphal last scene in which *Macbeth* is killed, his forces are routed and Malcolm succeeds to the throne.