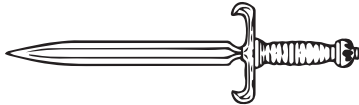
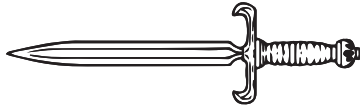


WORLDVIEW GUIDE

MACBETH

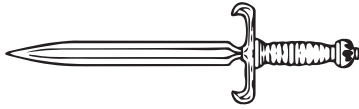


Brian Kohl



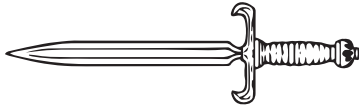
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INTRODUCTION

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.



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.