

Macbeth

by Shakespeare

Ask someone to name a Scottish king and odds are, if they answer at all, the response will be Macbeth. That answer will come, not from history, but from the theatre: from one of Shakespeare's great tragedies, "Macbeth."

There was a real Macbeth. He ruled Scotland for 17 years and, like his theatrical counterpart, came to a violent end. That almost had to be. Scotland had an unusual process for naming its kings. There were two royal lines and kings were chosen from them alternately.

Thus it's no surprise that the reigning king would be helped on his way to heaven by the person next in line. Inheritance by assassination became an unhappy consequence of this arrangement. Macbeth became king after eliminating Duncan; he was killed by his successor, Malcolm.

In that sense, Shakespeare's play is based on fact. But, as often happens in his works, time becomes compressed. The events of 17 years seem to shrink to a matter of weeks. The play moves to its conclusion with lightning speed. (One critic stated that "Macbeth" seems to have no beginning or middle; its beginning is actually the beginning of the end.)

According to tradition, the play was written for James the First, formally king of Scotland, who took the English throne on the death of Elizabeth I. He was said to be a superstitious man, one concerned with witchcraft. He even wrote a treatise on the subject.

Shakespeare came up with a perfect entertainment for the new king, one which involved his fictional forebear, Banquo, and the celebrated three witches. Everyone has heard their incantation; "Double, double, toil and trouble; fire burn and cauldron bubble."

An even more significant statement by the witches comes in the first scene: "Fair is foul and foul is fair." That pretty much characterizes the contradictory nature of the play. Things are not what they seem and Macbeth discovers this to his great disappointment and doom.

The witches open the play, planning to meet with Macbeth. But before that happens, we meet with Scotland's current king, Duncan, who receives report of a victory over rebels and invaders. He is told of the valor and fortitude of Macbeth, the Thane of Glamis and of the Thane of Cawdor's treachery. He sends messengers to summon Macbeth and greet him as the new Thane of Cawdor.

Then we meet Macbeth and Banquo, walking alone. They come upon the witches who greet Macbeth as both Glamis and Cawdor and the future king. They also tell Banquo

that he will be the father of kings. Hard on this come the king's messengers greeting Macbeth as Cawdor, thus fulfilling part of the witches' prophecy. This stirs Macbeth to think seriously about becoming king.

When Duncan greets Macbeth and Banquo, he announces that his son Malcolm will be heir to the throne, breaking the old tradition of alternating kingship between the two royal lines and effectively shutting Macbeth out of succession.

Lady Macbeth receives a letter from her husband, telling her of the witches, his advancement, and that Duncan plans to visit their castle, Dunsinane. She is thrilled at the prospect of having Duncan in their power. It is obvious from her soliloquy and her exchange with her husband when he arrives that they have already talked about taking action against Duncan.

When Duncan arrives at Dunsinane, Banquo comments on its beautiful prospect. This is the only scene in the play in which we have the impression that the sun is shining. All the rest of the work seems cloaked in darkness. In fact the dominant colors of the play are black and red: night and blood.

The next scene is perhaps the play's most compelling, marking the stark contrast between the two protagonists. Macbeth begins with a magnificent monologue, arguing with himself, for and against the crime, finally deciding against it. But Lady Macbeth enters and scorns him for cowardice, goading him to agree to do the deed.

It is interesting to examine these two at this point: Macbeth is tortured by his conscience while Lady Macbeth seems to have none. She is remorseless and grimly resolute for the murder. By the play's end, they will exchange characters.

Macbeth is finally won over and agrees to murder Duncan. He will smear the king's drunken grooms with blood and leave daggers in their hands to make them appear guilty. As he awaits a signal from his wife, Macbeth speaks the most famous soliloquy in the play, as his guilty conscience plays with his senses:

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?
I see thee yet, in form as palpable
As this which now I draw.

Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going;
And such an instrument I was to use.
Mine eyes are made the fools o' the other senses,
Or else worth all the rest; I see thee still,
And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood,
Which was not so before. There's no such thing:
It is the bloody business which informs
Thus to mine eyes. Now o'er the one halfworld
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtain'd sleep; witchcraft celebrates
Pale Hecate's offerings, and wither'd murder,
Alarum'd by his sentinel, the wolf,
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace.
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
Moves like a ghost. Thou sure and firm-set earth,
Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear
Thy very stones prate of my whereabout,
And take the present horror from the time,
Which now suits with it. Whiles I threat, he lives:
Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives.

A bell rings

I go, and it is done; the bell invites me.
Hear it not, Duncan; for it is a knell
That summons thee to heaven or to hell.

The murder done, Macbeth returns to his wife, but still carrying the bloody daggers. He refuses to return to Duncan's chamber, so Lady Macbeth takes the daggers from him and puts them by the grooms. Her hands are also bloody, but she says "a little water clears us of this deed." They go to their rooms as someone begins knocking at the castle gate.

Then follows a bit of comic relief. The porter, still drunk from the banquet, imagines the sound at the gate to come from a variety of sources. Incidentally, one of these

images helps us date the play, citing a Catholic priest who equivocated when giving evidence in the Gunpowder Plot trial.

MacDuff is admitted, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth greet him, and he goes to awaken the king. He discovers the crime and sounds the alarm. Macbeth rushes into the chamber and kills the two grooms, to prevent them giving testimony, excusing his action as anger at the murder. Duncan's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, decide to escape to England, lest they be marked for murder as well.

Macbeth is crowned King of Scotland, yet he is worried about the witches prediction that Banquo would become the father of kings. He hires two men to murder Banquo and his son Fleance.

The next scene is worth looking at closely. The two murderers lie in wait for their victims in company with a third man. The question is, who is this man? Where did he come from? Why is he the one who seems to know everything - and the one who immediately realizes that the escape of Fleance undermines the plot? It's almost as if the third murderer is a phantom of Macbeth, a dreamlike projection of the king himself at the scene of the crime. Examine the seven utterances of the third murderer and see what you think.

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are presiding at a banquet when the king hears from the murders. Immediately after, he sees the ghost of Banquo and becomes hysterical. The guests are dismissed and Macbeth resolves to revisit the witches to find what the future holds for him.

When he visits the witches, they warn him of MacDuff, but assure him that he cannot be killed until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane and he is opposed by a man who is not born of woman. Hearing that MacDuff has fled to England. Macbeth decides to move quickly, sending men to kill his wife and children.

MacDuff has gone to England to motivate Malcolm to return to Scotland to overthrow Macbeth. While trying to convince Malcolm, he hears of his family's murders. Malcolm tells him that England will send soldiers with him to capture Scotland's throne.

The rest of the play deals with the fight in a series of quick scenes. Some commentators think the play was completed in a hurry, or that some changes have been made. The main events in the battle involve the English soldiers disguising their numbers with branches, making it appear that Birnam Wood is marching toward Dunsinane.

In the final fight, Macbeth learns that MacDuff was not born of a woman, but delivered by caesarian section. All the witches prophecies have been truthful, but in a deceptive way. Their fair words proved foul in the end.

Before the fight, we see Lady Macbeth walking in her sleep, trying to cleanse her hands of imaginary blood. The role reversals are complete: Macbeth began as a man tortured by his conscience; Lady Macbeth was like iron in her resolution. At play's end, Macbeth has become a ruthless killer and Lady Macbeth's conscience will not let her rest.

This is Shakespeare's shortest tragedy and, on balance, perhaps his best. Hamlet is a profound character study, Othello is an involving domestic tragedy, and King Lear projects human suffering into a cosmic scale. Macbeth may be exceeded in grandeur in one aspect on another by these works, but it is an excellent average of them all.