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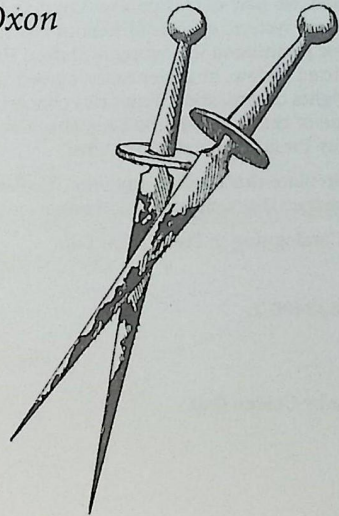


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Oxford School *Shakespeare*

Macbeth

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Introduction

About the Play

Royal entertainment

When Elizabeth I of England was dying, childless, she named James VI of Scotland as her successor. He became James I of England.



In August 1606 James was at Hampton Court, a palace near London, entertaining his brother-in-law, King Christian of Denmark. A play was acted for them, *Macbeth* – written by the best dramatist of the time, William Shakespeare. It was a new play, but the story was an old one, and James knew it well. It was about his ancestors, Banquo and Fleance, through whom he had inherited the throne of Scotland.

Shakespeare found the story in *The Chronicles of Scotland*, by Raphael Holinshed. However, his play is much more than a dramatic

re-writing of the historical facts. He made many changes, and the biggest of these concerned James's ancestor. In the *true* story, Banquo joined Macbeth in killing Duncan; but clearly it would be tactless to suggest that James was descended from a regicide – the murderer of a king. So Shakespeare's Banquo is innocent.

James also believed that he was descended spiritually from the long tradition of English monarchs, and that he had inherited the power of healing that Edward the Confessor (1042 – 66) possessed. Shakespeare's description of this power (Act IV, Scene iii, lines 148 – 58) is, to some extent, deliberate flattery of his king. Shakespeare also knew that James was extremely interested in witchcraft and had written a book about it.

Macbeth is certainly a play 'fit for a king'. On one level it is royal entertainment – and entertainment, too, for all those of us who enjoy the suspense and excitement of a murder story.

A moral lesson

But of course it is more than this – more than flattery for an ancient British monarch. Although the story is largely true, we do not read *Macbeth* as 'history'. We could interpret Shakespeare's play as a moral lesson. Macbeth murders his king. To murder any man is a crime, but those who lived at the time of Shakespeare thought that the murder of a king was the greatest of all crimes. Kings were appointed by God, to rule as His deputies: rebellion against a true king was rebellion against God. By murdering Duncan, Macbeth gains the crown; but he loses love, friendship, respect – and, in the end, his life. His crime is rightly punished.

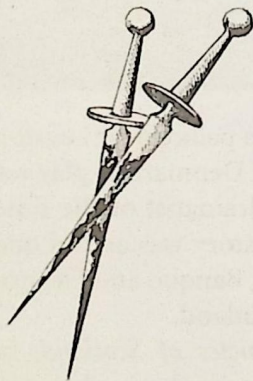
Macbeth teaches us, in a new way, the old lesson that crime does not pay. But there are at least two more levels.

About ambition

As we look at the character of Macbeth we see, more clearly than we are able to see in real life, the effects of uncontrolled ambition on a man. Macbeth is, except for his ambition, noble in nature. He has full knowledge of right and wrong; he knows that he has committed a very great crime by murdering Duncan. Shakespeare shows us how Macbeth gradually becomes hardened to his crimes, and yet how he suffers from fears which he has brought on himself.

Poetry and imagination

On another level, the play has great power as a work of poetry and imagination. The language is rich in sound and meaning, full of



pictures, and immensely varied. For example, when Macbeth comes from the murder of Duncan, his hands are covered in the king's blood. He looks at them, and feels that all the waters in the ocean cannot wash away the blood, but that

this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red. (Act II, Scene ii, lines 64 – 6)

The word 'multitudinous' gives a sense of vastness, and 'incarnadine' (meaning 'redden') is another impressive word; its length and sound give strength to the meaning. These two words are more Latin than English, and were very new to the English language; Shakespeare was one of the first writers to use them. They are followed by the simplest, most direct words. Imagine a film camera. First the camera shows you a picture of endless waters, stretching as far as the eye can see. Then there is a sudden close-up picture, perhaps a small pool of green water that turns red with blood as we look at it. Such skill in the use of language is unique.

* * *

Although I have distinguished four levels on which the play *Macbeth* can work, I do not want to give the impression that these levels can in fact be separated from each other. The entertainment, the moral teaching, the psychology of ambition, and the poetry are often all contained in the same speech – even, sometimes, in the same line. *Macbeth* demands an alert reader.

No summary can do justice to the play. At best, a commentary such as this can be no more than a map. It can show the roads, and even point out the important places; but it is no substitute for reading the play.

Leading Characters in the Play

- Duncan** The King of Scotland (c. 1034). He is presented as a true and gracious monarch – the embodiment of the Elizabethan belief that a king was appointed as God’s deputy on earth and was himself almost divine.
- Malcolm** Duncan’s elder son. Early in the play Malcolm is named as Duncan’s heir, the next king of Scotland – and consequently he becomes the prime suspect when Duncan is murdered.
- Macbeth** A mighty and ambitious warrior, one of the leaders of Duncan’s army. A witches’ prophecy leads him to murder Duncan so that he himself can be king – but his conscience afterwards will never let him rest.
- Lady Macbeth** Macbeth’s wife. She is even more ambitious than her husband, and has fewer moral scruples. She urges Macbeth to kill Duncan, and refuses to understand his doubts and hesitations. Gradually her close relationship with Macbeth crumbles into nothing.
- Banquo** Macbeth’s co-commander in Duncan’s army. He also hears the witches’ prophecies, but resists their temptation.
- Macduff** A Scottish thane (nobleman) who comes to prominence after the murder of Duncan and leads the opposition to Macbeth.
- Ross** A Scottish thane. He is a valuable commentator on the action of the play and its effects in the wider world outside Macbeth’s castle.
- The Witches** Three witches, or supernatural phenomena. Called the ‘weird sisters’ in Shakespeare’s historical source-book, they are related to the three Fates in classical mythology. Productions have represented them very differently: as grotesque and frightening; comic and ridiculous; young and beautiful; or masked and hideous.

Synopsis

ACT 1

- SCENE 1 A Prologue of evil: the witches plan to meet with Macbeth.
- SCENE 2 King Duncan is told of the success of the battle and of the bravery shown by Banquo and Macbeth. He decides to reward Macbeth with the title 'Thane of Cawdor'.
- SCENE 3 The witches speak strange prophecies to Macbeth and Banquo – and Ross brings the new title to Macbeth.
- SCENE 4 Duncan announces that his son, Malcolm, will be the next king of Scotland – and Macbeth begins to worry.
- SCENE 5 Lady Macbeth reads her husband's letter telling what has happened; she welcomes him home, and then prepares to receive the king.
- SCENE 6 King Duncan and his followers approach Macbeth's castle and are welcomed by Lady Macbeth.
- SCENE 7 Macbeth leaves the state dinner, suddenly worried by what he is planning to do – to murder Duncan. But Lady Macbeth stirs up his spirits again.

ACT 2

- SCENE 1 Banquo and his son, Fleance, are going to bed when they encounter Macbeth, who is preparing himself for his grim task.
- SCENE 2 Macbeth has murdered Duncan. Lady Macbeth takes the bloody daggers away from her husband, who is already beginning to regret what he has done.
- SCENE 3 All is discovered. The Porter is roused from his drunken sleep by Macduff and Lennox who go to call upon the king but find he has been murdered. Macbeth panics and kills Duncan's attendants. Duncan's sons are afraid for their own safety and slip away secretly.
- SCENE 4 Ross and an Old Man discuss the unnatural events that occurred on the night of Duncan's murder. They learn from Macduff that the king's two sons have fled, and that Macbeth has been chosen to be the next king.

ACT 3

- SCENE 1 Banquo is suspicious – and Macbeth arranges to have him and his son, Fleance, murdered by two hired assassins.
- SCENE 2 Lady Macbeth is uneasy. Macbeth assures her that everything is under control, but he refuses to tell her what he is planning.
- SCENE 3 Banquo is murdered – but Fleance escapes.
- SCENE 4 Macbeth and his wife welcome guests to another state banquet. The Ghost of Banquo appears but only Macbeth can see it, and his strange behaviour startles Lady Macbeth and their guests.
- SCENE 5 The witches and their queen, Hecate, prepare the audience for the next meeting with Macbeth.
- SCENE 6 Lennox and an unnamed Lord discuss the state of affairs: Malcolm is in England, Macduff has gone to join him, and the English king is raising an army to fight against Macbeth.

ACT 4

- SCENE 1 The witches assemble to meet Macbeth, and promise to answer his questions. Their magic Apparitions comfort him at first – and then give cause for alarm.
- SCENE 2 Lady Macduff questions Ross about her husband's flight, and then tries to explain the situation to her little son. A Messenger warns her to flee from the palace, but it is too late and the murderers rush into the room.
- SCENE 3 Macduff has joined Malcolm at the court of Edward the Confessor (King of England), and the two men, at first suspicious of each other, test their loyalties. Plans are in hand for an invasion of Scotland by the English king – then Macduff hears of the murder of his wife and children.

ACT 5

- SCENE 1 Lady Macbeth suffers from a guilty conscience. She walks in her sleep, and dreams that she and her husband are murdering King Duncan.
- SCENE 2 A section of the invading army marches towards Dunsinane, and their leaders discuss the enemy, Macbeth, who is showing signs of panic.

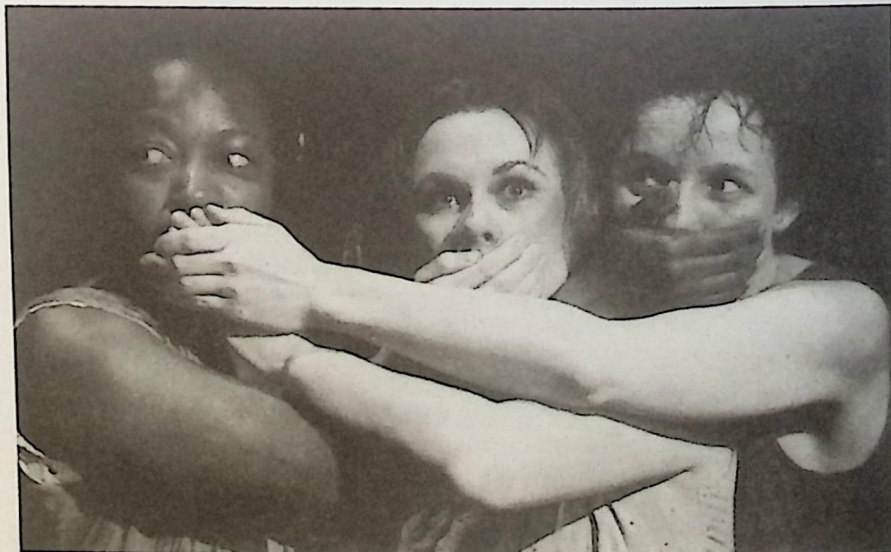
- Scene 3 When he is told of the approaching armies, Macbeth tries to comfort himself by recalling the witches' prophecies. He discusses his wife's condition with the Doctor, then goes off into battle.
- Scene 4 Malcolm's soldiers camouflage themselves with branches from the trees of Birnam Wood to mask their approach.
- Scene 5 The battle is at its height when Seyton brings news to Macbeth that his wife has just died. A Messenger tells Macbeth that Birnam Wood is moving towards Dunsinane.
- Scene 6 Malcolm's army reaches Macbeth's castle: the battle starts.
- Scene 7 Macbeth encounters Young Siward and kills him.
- Scene 8 Macduff comes in search of Macbeth, they fight, and Macbeth is killed.
- Scene 9 Malcolm is proclaimed King.

Macbeth: Commentary

ACT 1

- SCENE 1 A very short scene opens the play. It is long enough to awaken curiosity, but not to satisfy it. We have come in at the *end* of the witches' meeting, just as they are arranging their next appointment before their 'familiar spirits' – devils in animal shapes – call them away into the 'fog and filthy air'. The mood of the play is set here, although the action does not start until the next scene.
- SCENE 2 Here we learn about the tough battle that has been raging, about the rebels who seem to have all the luck, and about two brave men, Macbeth and Banquo, who win the victory for Scotland. King Duncan rewards Macbeth for his courage by giving him the title 'Thane of Cawdor'; but we ought to remember that the title first belonged to one who was 'a most disloyal traitor'.
- SCENE 3 The witches' malice and magic are shown, as they await Macbeth on the lonely moor (a wasteland area). They have power over the winds, and can make life miserable for such men as the captain of the ship, 'The Tiger'. Their dance, when they hear Macbeth's drum, is made up of steps in groups of three – a magical number. Macbeth and Banquo, however, are ordinary human beings, tired after the day's fighting and grumbling about the weather. Banquo is almost amused by the witches; he cannot

'Fair is foul, and foul is fair',
(1, i, 12). Aicha Kossoko,
Amanda Harris, and Joyce
Henderson as the three
Witches, Battersea Arts
Centre, 2000.



bring himself to think of them as women because 'your beards forbid me to interpret | That you are so'. Macbeth is stunned to silence by their prophecies, but Banquo questions them calmly.

The audience can judge the witches better than Macbeth can. We know, from the previous scene, that his courage, and not the witches' magic, has won him the title 'Thane of Cawdor'; and we are not surprised, as he is, when Ross greets him with this title. While Ross, Angus, and Banquo speak together (perhaps at the back of the stage), Macbeth speaks his own thoughts aloud in a soliloquy – a speech not intended by the speaker to be overheard by the other characters. They are frightening thoughts: they frighten Macbeth as well as us, because murder is in his mind. He tries to reject this, declaring that he will leave everything to chance:

If chance will have me king, why chance may crown me
Without my stir.

SCENE 4 When Duncan hears of the death of the treacherous Thane of Cawdor, he utters a very meaningful remark:

There's no art
To find the mind's construction in the face.
He was a gentleman on whom I built
An absolute trust.

We have not seen the traitor, so we do not know how appropriate these words are for *him*. But we have seen his successor as Thane, and Macbeth is certainly a gentleman on whom Duncan is building 'An absolute trust'. Duncan's comment could also be applied to other characters and events in this play, where things are not what they seem to be, where 'Fair is foul and foul is fair'.

At this point Duncan makes a very important announcement:

We will establish our estate upon
Our eldest, Malcolm, whom we name hereafter
The Prince of Cumberland.

In the time of Duncan, the crown of Scotland was not passed automatically from father to son. Instead, the king could name his successor, as Duncan does here, and grant him the title 'Prince of Cumberland'. If the king were to die without naming an heir, or if the heir was not acceptable, the Scottish nobles could elect a new king. We hear that Macbeth is elected in this way in Act II, Scene iv. Duncan's choice of Malcolm comes as a great shock to Macbeth, for he realizes it

is an obstacle between him and the crown. At the end of the scene, he admits to possessing 'black and deep desires,' but he is afraid to speak these openly, even to himself.

SCENE 5 We already know the contents of Macbeth's letter to his wife, but the letter is important because it shows us something of the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. He has no secrets from her, and she is his 'dearest partner of greatness'. Lady Macbeth understands her husband well. She knows that he has great ambitions, but she also knows that he is honourable, and that this sense of honour will not allow him to 'catch the nearest way' – murder. She knows that she will have to urge her husband on to become king, and she calls for evil spirits to help her. She is prepared to give up all the gentle, tender qualities of a woman, so that she can become a sexless, pitiless fiend. She takes full control over the situation, and Macbeth seems glad to let her have the responsibility.

SCENE 6 Duncan and his followers appreciate the peaceful harmony of Macbeth's castle, where Lady Macbeth welcomes the guests with an overflow of polite compliments, – which even the audience can barely understand.

SCENE 7 Alone after dinner, Macbeth has an opportunity to think about murdering his king, perhaps for the first time. At first murder had been only a dream, 'but fantastical' (Act 1, Scene iii, line 138), but now it is a real moral problem. He knows that the crime must be punished; divine justice in a 'life to come' does not worry him so much as judgement in this earthly life. Then he considers the duties he owes to Duncan – the duties of a kinsman, of a subject to his king, and of a host to his guest. Finally, he thinks of the character of Duncan, a king of almost divine excellence.

Macbeth has a vision of the heavenly powers in a state of horror at such a murder; he sees Pity personified as a 'naked new-born babe' which is nevertheless 'Striding the blast', while 'heaven's cherubin' are mounted on the winds. The speech builds to a mighty climax then, suddenly, the power is lost when Macbeth turns to his own wretched motive for committing such a crime. He can find nothing except 'Vaulting ambition', and even now he realizes that too high a leap ('vault') can only lead to a fall.

His mind is made up, and he tells his wife 'We will proceed no further in this business'. However, he is not prepared for her rage and

abuse. She calls him a coward, insults his manliness, and declares that she would have murdered her child while it was feeding at her breast, rather than break such a promise as Macbeth has done. Defeated by his wife's scorn, and persuaded by her encouragement, Macbeth agrees to murder his king.

ACT 2

SCENE 1 The witches have disturbed Banquo, as well as Macbeth. As he crosses the courtyard of Macbeth's castle, Banquo hears a noise, and calls for his sword. This suggests tension, as he should not need a sword in a friend's home. Macbeth also shows signs of stress – he speaks only a few words in his replies to Banquo, and when he is alone, the strain shows very clearly. He is living in a nightmare, but although he is at first alarmed by the dagger that his imagination creates, he seems later to *enjoy* the horror of the moment. The last lines of the scene could even show a grim humour:

the bell invites me.

Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell

That summons thee to heaven or to hell.

SCENE 2 Lady Macbeth is as tense as her husband, and she has been drinking to give herself courage. Her speech is jerky – she reacts to every sound, and when her husband comes from the king's room, his hands red with Duncan's blood, she greets him with relief and pride: 'My husband'. He has now proved himself, in her eyes, to be a man.

Macbeth, however, slowly awakens from the nightmare he has been living in and realizes what a terrible crime he has committed. He speaks of the real sounds he has heard, and then of the voice that cried:

'Sleep no more:

Macbeth does murder sleep'

This sleep ban will be carried out: never again will Macbeth, or his wife, have any rest, and from time to time throughout the play they will comment on their weariness and lack of refreshing sleep.

For the moment, however, Lady Macbeth again takes charge of the situation. Early in this scene, she revealed some natural, womanly feelings when she confessed that she could not murder Duncan herself because he 'resembled | My father as he slept'. But now she speaks a line which shows, terrifyingly, how little she thinks of the guilt that she shares with her husband:

A little water clears us of this deed.

SCENE 3 The mood of the play suddenly changes. The audience has been as tense as Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in the last scene, and we need to relax a little now. The Porter, woken from a drunken sleep, gives us something to laugh at. His jokes are not so funny today as they were in 1606. In Shakespeare's day, his chatter about the 'equivocator' might have reminded the audience of the recent and famous trial of a priest who could 'swear in both the scales against either scale'. Nevertheless, the wise observations on drink and lechery are still amusing for a modern audience.

When Macduff and Lennox arrive, they come almost from another world; or perhaps the Porter is more accurate than he could ever imagine when he pretends to be porter at the gate of hell. The tension mounts again as we wait for the murder to be discovered.

Lennox's description of the 'unruly' night would have been full of significance to the Elizabethans. They firmly believed that any disorder amongst humans was reflected by disorder in nature. Macbeth is cautious; nevertheless his reply to Lennox – 'twas a rough night' – seems an understatement.

The moment we have been waiting for arrives. Macduff's words emphasize the fact that this is more than an ordinary murder:

Confusion now hath made his masterpiece:
Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope
The Lord's anointed temple.

The scene is chaotic: alarm-bells ring, and characters appear from all sides of the stage. Macduff is almost hysterical; the king's sons are afraid; Macbeth impulsively kills Duncan's servants – and by doing so arouses Macduff's suspicion. The speech in which Macbeth attempts to justify himself may perhaps convince the other thanes, but we know how false it is, and the elaborate images ('His silver skin lac'd with his golden blood') stress this falsehood. Lady Macbeth knows the truth too: she faints (or pretends to faint) and some attention is drawn away from her husband.

SCENE 4 The short scene between Ross and the Old Man serves three purposes. At first, it continues the comparison begun in Lennox's lines in Scene iii between the human world and the natural world, mentioning strange events and stressing that they are

unnatural,
Even like the deed that's done.

The second function of the scene appears when Macduff enters to bring more news: it indicates the passing of time. Thirdly, it brings Macduff into greater prominence, because it allows the actor to reveal, by the tone of his voice, that Macduff continues to be suspicious of Macbeth, and that he does not believe the answers Macbeth gives to Ross's questions.

ACT 3

SCENE 1 Banquo also is suspicious of Macbeth:

Thou hast it now, King, Cawdor, Glamis, all,
As the weird women promis'd, and I fear
Thou played'st most foully for't

SCENE 2

But he thinks about the prophecy concerning his own children, and this gives him hope. Macbeth too has been thinking about this prophecy, and it gives him cause for bitterness: he realizes that his crown is 'fruitless', and his sceptre 'barren'. He murdered Duncan in order to make the witches' prophecy come true, and now he plots to murder Banquo and Fleance so that the witches' promise to Banquo may *not* come true.

Lady Macbeth now begins to show signs of strain, and we hear that Macbeth suffers 'terrible dreams'. For a moment, Macbeth and his wife show understanding and sympathy for each other, but the moment does not last long. Macbeth keeps the plot to murder Banquo secret from his wife. He alarms her by conjuring up an atmosphere of evil, and once again he appears to enjoy his dreadful imaginings (just as he did when he went to murder Duncan). But it is a mistake to hide the facts from Lady Macbeth: this is the beginning of the break in their relationship.

When Macbeth calls upon 'seeling night' to hide his wickedness, we are reminded how Lady Macbeth, before the murder of Duncan, had called for the night, shrouded in 'the dunnest smoke of hell' (1, v, 50), to hide the murdering dagger from the sight of heaven.

SCENE 3 Outside the castle, the two murderers wait for Banquo and Fleance. It is a surprise, to us as well as to them, when a third hired assassin appears. Macbeth can trust no one, not even the thugs he first hired to murder Banquo.

SCENE 4 The confusion of Banquo's murder contrasts well with the ceremony of the state banquet. The formality is announced in the first line:

'You know your own degrees; sit down'; and the scene proceeds with dignity for some time. However, the appearance of one of Banquo's murderers disturbs the peace for Macbeth. The state occasion demands courteous behaviour from the king, but when the murderer says that Fleance has escaped, Macbeth becomes agitated. Banquo's Ghost, which only Macbeth can see, adds to this distress, until the whole scene breaks into fragments, and Lady Macbeth has to ask her guests to leave, without any of the formality with which they arrived:

Stand not upon the order of your going,
But go at once.

The banquet is symbolic as well as realistic, and Shakespeare is careful that we do not overlook this aspect. As soon as the guests are seated, Macbeth promises to 'drink a measure | The table round'. In many societies and religions, the sharing of a cup of wine, sometimes even called a 'loving-cup', symbolizes unity and fellowship and this it is how it is intended here. When Macbeth steps away from the table to speak to the murderer, Lady Macbeth calls him back. She reminds him of his duty as a host, adding that on such an occasion 'the sauce to meat is ceremony'. By murdering Duncan, Macbeth brings chaos to Scotland, breaking up the harmony of a well-ordered country, just as he breaks up the state banquet 'With most admir'd disorder'.


SCENE 5 The witches and their queen, Hecate, prepare for another meeting with Macbeth. There is evidence to suggest that Shakespeare did not write this scene, and some people believe it was inserted by an over-enthusiastic actor, who saw that the audiences enjoyed the witches' scenes, and decided to give them another!

SCENE 6 Suspicion of Macbeth is growing. Lennox speaks here not as himself, an individual character, but with what we now call 'the voice of the people'. His words are innocent in meaning, but the exaggeration of tone directs the actor to make his speech heavily sarcastic – for example:

How it did grieve Macbeth! Did he not straight
In pious rage the two delinquents tear,
That were the slaves of drink and thralls of sleep?

The unnamed Lord gives us information, in this scene, about Malcolm, and also makes the first reference in the play to the king of England, 'the most pious Edward', who is the complete opposite of Macbeth. This comparison will be developed in a later scene.

ACT 4



SCENE 1 We now see Macbeth receiving comfort from the three Apparitions that the witches call up. They appear in symbolic form. The first, 'an armed head', represents Macbeth's own head (wearing a helmet); the 'bloody child' that comes next is Macduff, who had been 'untimely ripp'd' from his mother's womb (as he tells Macbeth in Act v, Scene vii); and the last, the royal child with a tree in his hand, is Malcolm, the rightful king of Scotland, who approaches the palace at Dunsinane camouflaged with tree-branches (Act v, Scene iv). Macbeth cannot interpret these symbols, but Shakespeare expects the audience to understand what is meant. This is 'dramatic irony' – when the truth of a situation is known to the audience but hidden from the characters in the play. There is dramatic irony, too, in the words spoken by the Apparitions, for again we understand the real meanings, while Macbeth can only understand the apparent meanings of the words. Macbeth, however, is in no doubt about the significance of the final 'show of Eight Kings'.

SCENE 2 This pathetic scene in which Lady Macduff and her son are massacred shows us Macbeth's cruelty in action. When he plotted to kill Banquo's son, Fleance, he could justify the crime to himself by referring to the prophecy that Banquo's children should be kings. But he is in no danger from Lady Macduff or from her son, and the crime is more dreadful because it is motiveless. Our knowledge of the crime helps us to find

SCENE 3 more dramatic irony in the scene that follows, when Malcolm mistrusts Macduff chiefly because he cannot understand

Why in that rawness left you wife and child,
Those precious motives, those strong knots of love,
Without leave-taking?

Macduff must prove his loyalty to Malcolm and to Scotland; then Malcolm must prove that he is worthy to be king. Again we are told about Edward the Confessor, and this time we hear about his divine gift of healing. This characteristic was not chosen by chance. Shakespeare uses many images of sickness – just a little later in this scene, he describes Scotland as a place where

good men's lives
Expire before the flowers in their caps,
Dying or ere they sicken.

In Act v, Scene ii Caithness recognizes Malcolm as the doctor who can cure Scotland's sickness, calling him 'the med'cine of the sickly weal' (line 27).

We respond intellectually to this account of the English king, and to the idea of the monarch as some kind of physician, appointed by God to safeguard the country's health. We respond emotionally to the next episode in this long scene where Ross breaks the bad news to Macduff. We feel the painful irony of Ross's evasive answer: 'they were well at peace when I did leave 'em'. If we had not seen Lady Macduff and her son, we should not be distressed; because of Scene ii, however, we are able to share Macduff's own grief. I am always moved by Macduff's answer to Malcolm, who urges him to

Dispute it like a man.

Macduff replies with dignity

I shall do so;
But I must also feel it as a man.

The word 'man' is being used in two senses. Malcolm intends it to mean 'bravely', but Macduff is thinking of a man as a human being, with tender emotions of love and grief, which must not be denied.

ACT 5

SCENE 1 The very next scene shows what happens when human emotions are denied. At the beginning of the play, Lady Macbeth prayed that she should know 'no compunctious visitings of nature' (I, v, 44) that might prevent her from murdering Duncan. Now she walks in her sleep, and her mind constantly re-lives the night of the murder. On that night, she declared confidently that 'A little water clears us of this deed' (II, ii, 70), but now she knows that 'all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand'. It is the last time we see Lady Macbeth. Although the Doctor warns her lady-in-waiting to 'Remove from her the means of all annoyance', we learn later that, 'by self and violent hands', she kills herself (v, ix, 37).

SCENE 2 From now until the end of the play the action moves between the two armies: Malcolm's soldiers, steadily drawing closer to Dunsinane, and Macbeth's forces, besieged near the castle. Caithness and Angus discuss the strength of the enemy, and Angus offers a shrewd comment on Macbeth:

Now does he feel his title
Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe
Upon a dwarfish thief.

This is not the first image of badly-fitting clothes. When Macbeth is given the title 'Thane of Cawdor', soon after the witches' prophesy that it will be given to him, he stands apart from Banquo and the king's messengers. Then Banquo laughs, and explains that Macbeth is like a man with new clothes:

New honours come upon him
Like our strange garments, cleave not to their mould,
But with the aid of use. (I, iii, 143-5)

Macbeth himself thinks of the praises he has earned for his courage in terms of fine clothes,

Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,
Not cast aside so soon. (I, vii, 34-5)

There are many allusions like this throughout the play. They make us stop and think about the relationship between Macbeth and the honours he is 'wearing'. Has he won them, or stolen them? Will his 'clothes' fit, in time – or will they always be too big for him?

SCENE 3 When he has heard the Doctor's medical opinion of his wife, Macbeth asks, with his grim humour, for a medical opinion on the state of the country. The Doctor is allowed the same humour when he closes the scene:

Were I from Dunsinane away and clear,
Profit again should hardly draw me here.

The situation is now so serious that only a sour joke (playing on the generally accepted belief that doctors are greedy for gold) can ease the tension.

SCENE 4 Birnam Wood begins to move and what seemed like witches' magic is seen to be elementary military tactics. Excitement and tension mount,
SCENE 5 as the soldiers come closer to Dunsinane. But Macbeth does not respond to the excitement: he has lost the capacity for feeling either fear or, as we see when he hears of his wife's death, grief. He speaks the most disillusioned words that Shakespeare ever wrote when he contemplates life and its 'petty pace from day to day'. He still hopes that the witches'



promises (made to him in Act iv, Scene i) will protect him; but when he hears that 'The wood began to move' his confidence is shaken, and he begins

To doubt the equivocation of the fiend
That lies like truth.

At this point we should remember the 'equivocator' that the Porter joked about, long ago, in Act II, Scene iii, and appreciate the way that this whole play insists on the difference between *being* and *seeming*, or between saying one thing and meaning another.

SCENE 6 Continuous battle is now being waged, and the stage should never be
TO empty. Macbeth is at last forced to confront Macduff, and also to face
SCENE 9 the truth and admit that 'these juggling fiends' cannot be trusted. When
the castle has been surrendered, Macbeth defeated, and victory
proclaimed, Malcolm announces the beginning of a new reign. Order
has now been returned to Scotland, and business will once again be
conducted 'in measure, time, and place'.

Macbeth: the Man

Who can tell us more about a man's character than his wife? Shakespeare allows Lady Macbeth to explain her husband's character as she understands it, and although she cannot see the *whole* truth, she tells us a great deal about Macbeth that *is* true. Two lines of her soliloquy in Act I, Scene v are particularly significant:

Thou wouldst be great,
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it. (I, v, 17–19)

By 'illness' Lady Macbeth means 'evil', but her metaphor is appropriate: Macbeth 'catches' evil, as one might catch a disease. The play shows how his symptoms develop, until there is no hope of a cure, and the man must die.

Macbeth the noble warrior

We hear a lot about Macbeth before he comes on to the stage, first from the Sergeant who has fought on his side, and then from Ross, who also speaks about Macbeth's courage in battle. These descriptions lead us to expect a noble warrior and a loyal subject to Duncan. We have only one slight doubt about Macbeth, and we are not able to explain quite what this is. We know that, somehow, he is associated with the witches; and this, surely, cannot be good.

Macbeth's ambition

Macbeth speaks very little when first the witches, and then Ross, hail him as 'Thane of Cawdor'. Perhaps he is stunned to silence by his good fortune. But soon we hear him speak – or rather, think aloud, for he does not mean to be overheard:

Glamis, and Thane of Cawdor:
The greatest is behind. (I, iii, 115–16)

Very soon he begins to admit to a 'suggestion', some 'horrible imaginings', and then he says the word 'murder' to himself (I, iii, 133–137; 138). Once this word has been spoken, we must regard Macbeth with suspicion, and the suspicion grows when he confesses his 'black and deep desires' in the scene that follows (I, iv, 51). Our suspicions are confirmed when his wife, speaking as though he were in the room with her, tells Macbeth that she knows he wants



that which rather thou dost fear to do,
Than wishest should be undone. (I, v, 23–4)

It is not, however, cowardice that restrains Macbeth. At the end of Act I he is wrestling with his conscience. He is deeply aware of the duty which he owes to Duncan:

He's here in double trust:
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself. (I, vii, 12–16)

These are profound reasons for curbing his ambition, but Macbeth continues the soliloquy. Even if he were not – as kinsman, subject, and host – in duty bound to *defend* Duncan, rather than harm him, there would still be enormous sin in killing the king. Macbeth appreciates Duncan's fine qualities – his humility and his integrity in carrying out to perfection the tasks of kingship. Macbeth knows that to destroy such virtue would be a crime against heaven. He can appreciate Duncan's good qualities and this is a virtue in Macbeth.

Before Lady Macbeth comes on to the scene, Macbeth has won a great victory over himself, and he is almost triumphant when he tells her, 'We will proceed no further in this business' (I, vii, 31).

Macbeth and murder

But Lady Macbeth, unlike her husband, has no such conscience. At this moment, she is the stronger of the two, and Macbeth cannot stand up to her accusations that he is a coward, lacking in manliness, and a traitor to his word. He gives in to her and, in order to prove himself a man in her eyes, he allows her to guide him.

After the murder of Duncan, Macbeth is horrified to think of what he has done. Again Shakespeare contrasts Macbeth and his wife in their attitudes to murder. Lady Macbeth is bold and confident, because she does not understand that the deed is morally wrong; her only concern is to destroy the evidence. Macbeth, however, awakens to a consciousness of guilt that will remain with him until his death.

Macbeth now has to act many parts. When the body of Duncan is discovered, he must appear as the loyal subject, appalled by the murder of his king. In speaking to the two Murderers whom he has hired to kill Banquo, he tries to show that he is a worthy ruler, distressed by injuries which have been inflicted on his subjects. And at the state banquet, probably his first public appearance since he was made king, he plays



the part of host and friend to his thanes. He is not wholly successful in any of these roles. When the murder is discovered, he over-acts to such an extent that his wife tries to draw attention away from him by fainting. The Murderers are not interested in his efforts to justify the murder of Banquo: they have been hired to kill a man, and they will do the job they are paid to do. And the banquet is ruined for Macbeth by the appearance of Banquo's Ghost.

Macbeth appears again as himself (that is, not playing any 'part') at the end of Act III, Scene iv, when he and his wife face each other across the remains of their banquet. He now knows that 'blood will have blood' (III, iv, 122), and that the first murder is *only* the first. A new character is emerging – a man who is so desperate that he must act and not stop to consider the reasons for acting:

Strange things I have in head that will to hand,
Which must be acted ere they may be scann'd. (3, 4, 139–40)

The last line here refers to an actor's part in a play, which ought to be 'scann'd' – learned – before it is performed. With this comparison, Macbeth is beginning to recognize an element of unreality about his life.

Macbeth the cruel tyrant

The new Macbeth confronts the witches and demands to be answered. The answers give him a feeling of confidence which we, the audience, know to be unfounded. But Macbeth trusts no one. He has no faith in the loyalty of the thanes, and sets spies on each one of them (see iii, iv, 131–2). Now it seems that he will not trust even the witches and their 'masters', as he is determined to 'make assurance double sure' (iv, i, 82) by slaughtering Macduff's entire family.

We do not see Macbeth for some time after his appearance in this scene with the witches. We hear a lot about him, though – and everything that we hear tells us that Macbeth has become a cruel tyrant, and that he has changed Scotland into a country 'Almost afraid to know itself' (iv, iii, 167). There are more rumours to be heard when Malcolm's army moves towards Dunsinane, and we learn that opinions about Macbeth vary – but only slightly:

Some say he's mad; others that lesser hate him
Do call it valiant fury. (v, ii, 13–14)

He is indeed madly self-confident, believing that he is invincible:

Till Birnam Wood remove to Dunsinane,
I cannot taint with fear. What's the boy Malcolm?
Was he not born of woman? (v, iii, 2-4)

Macbeth the defeated

Alone, however, Macbeth is neither mad nor furious. He feels old and lonely:

My way of life
Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf,
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have. (v, iii, 22-6)

Seyton tells him that his wife is dead, but he cannot grieve for her. Life has no meaning for him, and once again he sees himself as an actor,

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. (v, v, 24-5)

He has lost everything, and when he hears of the 'moving grove' (v, v, 37) he knows that he is defeated.

Macbeth the dead butcher

Macbeth chooses to die in battle, 'with harness on our back' (v, v, 51), and the decision perhaps revives a spark of our former respect for the mighty warrior. At last he is challenged by Macduff, and he is reluctant to fight:

Of all men else I have avoided thee,
But get thee back, my soul is too much charg'd
With blood of thine already. (v, viii, 4-6)

How should we interpret this? The first of the Apparitions told Macbeth to 'Beware Macduff' – is this why he has avoided him? Or is it guilt that has kept Macbeth from coming face-to-face with the man whose wife and children he has so brutally murdered? Is conscience returning along with courage?

Shakespeare's Verse

Easily the best way to understand and appreciate Shakespeare's verse is to read it aloud – and don't worry if you don't understand everything! Try not to be too influenced by the dominant rhythm. Instead, decide which are the most important words in each line and use the regular metre to drive them forward to the listeners.

Blank verse

Shakespeare's plays are mainly written in 'blank verse', the form preferred by most dramatists in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It is a very flexible form, which is capable – like the human speaking voice – of a wide range of tones. Basically the lines, which are unrhymed, are ten syllables long. The syllables have alternating stresses, just like normal English speech; and they divide into five 'feet'. The technical name for this is 'iambic pentameter'.

Iambic pentameter

A perfectly regular iambic pentameter would have stresses in the following places. Notice how many of them sound like the normal rhythm of speech.

Macbeth

So foúl and faír a dáy I háve not seén.

Banquo

How fár is't cáll'd to Fórrés? Whát are thése,
So wíther'd ánd so wíld in théir attíre,
That loók not líke th'inhábitants ó'th'eárrh,
And yét are ón't? – Live yóu, or áre you áúght
That mán may quéstíon? You seém to únderstánd me,
By eách at ónce her chóppy fínger láying
Upón her skínny líps; you shóuld be wómen,
And yét your beárds forbíd me tó intérpreat
That yóu are só.

Macbeth

Speak íf you cán: what áre you?

1, iii, 36–45

Here the pentameter accommodates a variety of speech tones. Macbeth is casual in his conversation about the weather. Banquo is surprised at the appearance of these creatures, and fearful that they may be

supernatural beings; he is comforted when they seem to understand him; and he can even make a nervous joke about their beards. Macbeth, speaking with some authority, completes a line started by Banquo – and so identifies himself with the other's feelings. Some words in Banquo's speech have had to be elided. This is when sounds or syllables are missed out and words are merged together as in 'th'inhabitants', and 'o'th'. This is usual in English – especially when the speaker is under pressure from some emotion (and Banquo is *very* surprised!).

Some variations

In this quotation, the lines are mainly regular in length and normal in iambic stress pattern. Sometimes Shakespeare deviates from the norm, writing lines that are longer or shorter than ten syllables, and varying the stress patterns for unusual emphasis. The verse line sometimes contains the grammatical unit of meaning:

'So wither'd and so wild in their attire'

This allows for a pause at the end of the line, before a new idea is started. At other times, the sense runs on from one line to the next:

'are you aught
That man may question'.

This allows for the natural fluidity of speech, avoiding monotony but still maintaining the iambic rhythm.

Source, Text, and Date

Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of Scotland* (1577) provided most of the material Shakespeare needed for the writing of *Macbeth* – which was probably in the summer of 1606. The evidence for this date comes partly from within the play itself, when the drunken Porter in Act II, Scene iii imagines himself to be functioning at the gate of hell. Among the damned sinners he lets in is a certain 'equivocator', who has 'committed treason enough for God's sake', but who has not been able 'to equivocate to heaven'. This is a reference to a certain Father Garnet, a Jesuit priest who was tried and executed in the spring of 1606 for his part in the Gunpowder Plot to blow up the King and the Houses of Parliament on 5th November in the previous year. Father Garnet was known to have prayed for 'the good success of this great action, concerning the Catholic cause, in the beginning of Parliament', and then denied that his prayer had any reference to the Plot, maintaining that, in such a case of absolute necessity, it would not be illegal to change his mind or confirm that change of mind by oath.

The play did not appear in print until the First Folio collection of Shakespeare's *Works* was published in 1623. The text here shows some signs of revision (perhaps by Shakespeare himself) and adaptation (probably after Shakespeare's death). Certainly one scene (III, v) has been added, and another (IV, i) has been adjusted, both of them accommodating songs from *The Witch*, a much later play of uncertain date by Thomas Middleton.

The present edition is based on the text established by A. R. Braunmuller for the New Cambridge Shakespeare (1997).

For more information about the source of *Macbeth*, turn to page 101.

