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INTRODUCTION TO *MACBETH*

Macbeth is among the shortest and most intense of Shakespeare's plays, as well as one of the best known and most widely recognized. *Macbeth* is generally viewed as one of Shakespeare's four great tragedies, in addition to *Hamlet, Othello,* and *King Lear*. The play's penetrating exploration of human nature, ambition, evil, gender, human relationships, and kingship — along with the periodic appearance of supernatural forces — has captivated audiences and critics for centuries.

Like all of Shakespeare's works, *Macbeth* is an incredibly rich and rewarding play to read and study. It was written more than 400 years ago, so this introduction provides cultural, theatrical, and publication contexts. The introduction also highlights many of the themes and concepts that Shakespeare explores.

Shakespeare's tragedies

Although Shakespeare wrote many comedies and history plays, he seems to be best known for his tragedies. A tragedy usually depicts the fall of a man of high station or class, such as a king, a prince, or a general. Occasionally, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, it portrays the fall of a couple. Main characters in a tragedy can fall from power or fall from happiness, but they almost always die by the end of the play.

In a good tragedy, such as *Macbeth*, readers and audience members get pulled into the play by identifying with the protagonist, who is painted as a great and admirable person wielding considerable influence in society. Having established this point of identification, Shakespeare then leads his audience through the downfall of this character, involving the audience in the hero's pain and suffering, as well as his or her mistakes. This identification slowly separates as, through the course of the play, the audience gains more knowledge of the situation than the hero does. This distance and enlarged view allows the audience to foresee the hero's demise. Though no longer identifying with the hero, the audience is still trapped in the tension of the play and released only by the protagonist's death.

In most tragedies, the decline of the character arises from circumstances of the protagonist's own creation. Because tragic heroes are almost always responsible for their demise, critics and scholars sometimes identify their mistakes as stemming from some sort of *tragic flaw*, be it indecision, ambition, pride, or jealousy. Though Shakespeare's tragic heroes are complex and cannot be easily reduced to one abstract principle, identifying a character's tragic flaw can provide a wonderful place to begin studying the play.

The rise and fall of Macbeth

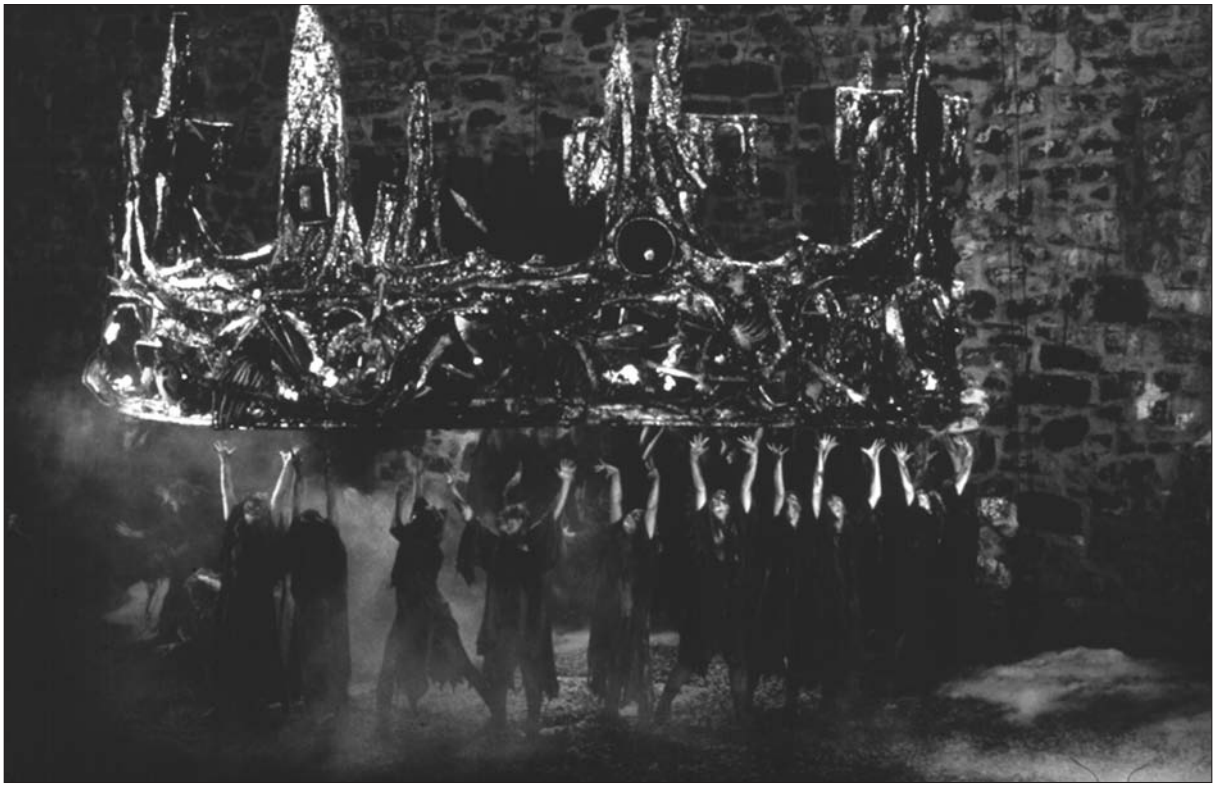
Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's fastest and most straight-forward tragedies in its portrayal of the rise and fall of Macbeth, a nobleman of Scotland who is also a successful military leader. Early in the play, he encounters three "weird sisters," usually referred to as witches. These witches refer to him by his current title, Thane of Glamis; then by a title that he is not yet aware of, Thane of Cawdor; and finally by a title that he does not yet possess, King of Scotland.

When Macbeth later learns that he has been named Thane of Cawdor, he begins to believe that

the weird sisters have the gift of prophecy. He then must decide between waiting patiently for the prophecy to come true or killing the current king, Duncan, and forcing it to come true. Prompted by his wife (and by the announcement that Malcolm, Duncan's son, is the heir to throne), Macbeth kills Duncan and becomes the King of Scotland.

Unfortunately for Macbeth, the witches' prophecy also indicated that although he would be king, his friend Banquo's descendents would establish a line of kings after Macbeth. (An apparition that Macbeth sees in Act IV, Scene 1 of the play indicates that Banquo's line stretches all the way to King James VI of Scotland, who became King James I of England during Shakespeare's lifetime.)

Threatened by Banquo's prophecy, Macbeth begins to behave like a tyrant, killing Banquo and trying to kill his son, Fleance. His paranoia takes over, and he begins to kill anyone who seems to pose a threat to his reign. Literally haunted by apparitions, Macbeth continues his horrific behavior until Malcolm returns with the help of Macduff, another Scottish nobleman, and support from England. Macbeth is killed, and at the play's end, Malcolm becomes king and restores Duncan's line to the Scottish throne. We do not see the witches' prophecy for Banquo come true, but because Fleance survives the attempt against his life, the possibility exists that Banquo's line will someday assume the throne.



A scene from a 1997 production at the Savonlinna Opera Festival.
Clive Barda/PAL

Historical sources of the story

Though *Macbeth* is not considered a history play, the title character is a Scottish historical figure. As we shall see when we look at its cultural context, this play also has intimate links with Early Modern England. Historically, Macbeth ruled as King of Scotland for 17 years, from 1040 to 1057. The accounts of this period in Scottish history vary. They all agree, however, that Macbeth gained the throne by killing King Duncan and lost the throne to Malcolm by being killed. Shakespeare relied upon these histories as well as other sources in the composition of this play. Specifically, he drew heavily from Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1587), but he may also have been familiar with George Buchanan's *Rerum Scoticarum Historae* (1582).

Shakespeare deviates from these historical sources a great deal in his exploration of the themes of kingship, human nature, and evil. These alterations to the story include portraying the tragic hero in a more evil manner while painting Banquo (King James I's ancestor) in a more sympathetic light. For example, Holinshed's and Shakespeare's depictions of Duncan differ wildly. Historically, Duncan is described as a young, weak, and ineffective king. But Shakespeare's Duncan is an older, benevolent, influential, and virtuous king, whose murder is a crime against nature itself.

Furthermore, in Holinshed's account, Banquo figures more prominently in Macbeth's ascension to the throne because he serves as Macbeth's accomplice in Duncan's murder. Shakespeare's Banquo maintains his loyalty to Duncan, telling Macbeth that he will help as long as it does not compromise this loyalty: "So I lose none / In seeking to augment it, but still keep / My bosom franchis'd and allegiance clear, / I shall be counsell'd" (II.1.26–29).

In Shakespeare's play, Macbeth's descent into tyranny occurs over what seems a matter of weeks, and there is no mention of the ten years of peaceful rule that Scotland enjoyed under Macbeth. The final major alteration concerns Lady Macbeth, who figures very little in the historical accounts but is quite prominent in Shakespeare's play. Lady Macbeth appears only once in Holinshed's *Chronicles,* and her only action is to persuade her husband to commit *regicide* (the murder of a king). Critics have speculated that Shakespeare's depiction of Duncan's murder and Lady Macbeth's active and ambitious role (drugging the servants and smearing them with blood) may be borrowed from Holinshed's account of Captain Donwald and his wife's murder of King Duffe. As we can see, in addition to revising historical sources, Shakespeare frequently integrated various accounts to construct one coherent story.

The revisions to the historical accounts of Macbeth are more easily understood when we understand the culture in which Shakespeare was writing. Pinpointing the date of composition for this tragedy will allow us to get a better glimpse at the play's immediate context.

The birth of the play

The earliest published version of *Macbeth* appears in the First Folio in 1623, though many critics feel that this edition of the play is modified from the lost original. The first reference to a production of *Macbeth* pushes the play's date back to 1611. A Jacobean playgoer named Simon Forman recorded in his *Book of Plays* that he saw this work performed on April 20, 1611 at the Globe theatre.

Upon examining references to contemporary events and people, however, critics have concluded that *Macbeth* was most likely written and first performed in 1606. In the intervening 17 years, the play was revised (around 1609), most likely by dramatist Thomas Middleton, who added some of the witches' songs in Act III, Scene 5 and Act IV, Scene 1. Middleton may also be responsible for other lines in the play, though we cannot be certain. Keep in mind, as explained in the "Introduction to Early Modern

England," that a play belonged to the theatre company. Therefore, revisions by other playwrights were common. Middleton's additions to *Macbeth* do not detract from the quality of Shakespeare's work; rather, they provide scholars and critics with opportunities to learn more about the ways in which plays were produced in Early Modern England.

The ascension of James I

The event that had the biggest impact on the 1606 production of *Macbeth* — and which may have been responsible for Shakespeare writing this play — is the ascension of King James VI of Scotland to the English throne, thus becoming King James I of England. In May 1603, shortly after he became king, James became the personal patron of Shakespeare's acting company, causing it to change names from the Lord Chamberlain's Men to the King's Men. This patronage provided many benefits to the theatrical company, including increased opportunities to perform at court and financial assistance when the theatres were closed because of plague. Because of this, some critics view the production of *Macbeth* a mere three years after James's ascension to the English throne as Shakespeare's tribute to his company's patron. Others have argued the opposite — that this play is more a criticism of King James than a tribute to him.

Divine right versus elected kingship

Regardless of Shakespeare's intentions toward the king, James and his beliefs play a large part in this play. James was supposedly a direct descendent of Banquo, and critics assert that in Macbeth's apparition of Banquo's royal descendents (in Act IV, Scene 1), James is the last king portrayed in the vision. As discussed in the "Introduction to Early Modern England," King James believed in the divine right of kings, which is the assertion that the king is God's emissary on Earth and that kingship is passed patrilineally through the father. This belief system led to the practice of *primogeniture*, which meant that a king's eldest son inherited the throne.

In the eleventh century, Scotland changed the way it selected its kings. Prior to that time, kings were elected by a council of noblemen (or thanes). In the eleventh century, Scotland adopted the patrilineal system, so the throne was passed from father to eldest son. This historical information is important to our understanding of the play. After Macbeth kills Duncan, Malcolm and Donalbain fear for their lives and flee the country. Thus, Duncan's sons are suspected of playing an active role in their father's death. This implication and their absence leaves the throne available to Macbeth. In Act II, Scene 4, Macduff tells fellow nobleman Ross that Macbeth "is already nam'd, and gone to Scone / To be invested." That Macbeth is *named* king implies a reversion to the process of election to the throne.

These questions of kingship could be found in Shakespeare's England as well. Because Elizabeth did not marry, she never produced a male heir. This fact prompted anxieties and questions over succession in the minds of many people in Early Modern England. Without a male heir, Elizabeth named James VI of Scotland (who could trace his lineage to Henry VII, Elizabeth's grandfather) as King of England on her deathbed. Though James's succession did not face much opposition, Shakespeare is clearly grappling with questions of kingship that were raised during James's succession of Elizabeth.

The Gunpowder Plot

Macbeth also mirrors a plot to assassinate King James that had been discovered in 1605 — a year before Shakespeare's play appeared on stage. This curtailed attempt at James's life is commonly referred to as the Gunpowder Plot, because officials found a large amount of gunpowder and iron bars in a basement below Parliament the day before King James was to personally open a new session. Under divine right, regicide was the worst crime possible. It is no

coincidence that one of the most striking references to early seventeenth-century England in *Macbeth* appears directly after Macbeth kills Duncan.

At the beginning of Act II, Scene 3, Macbeth's porter answers the knocking at Macbeth's gate that began in the previous scene. While complaining about the incessant pounding, the porter refers to the person knocking as an "equivocator, that could swear in both the scales against either scale" (II.3.8–10). Modern editors and scholars, such as Stephen Greenblatt and David Bevington, assert that this line is a direct reference to the Jesuit thinker Henry Garnet. In addition to being executed for his participation in the Gunpowder Plot, Garnet wrote *A Treatise of Equivocation,* which provided a justification for lying. The treatise argued that a statement was not a lie if it could possibly be true from another perspective. Consequently, this reference is one of the ways in which modern editors have placed *Macbeth's* composition in 1606.

Macbeth and the weird sisters in a 1993 National Theatre production.
Fritz Curzon/PAL

Focus on the supernatural

In addition to exploring theories of kingship in the play, Shakespeare also capitalized on James's interest in the supernatural. Though interest in witches and the supernatural existed during Elizabeth's reign, James's fascination extended to a personal interaction with these forces.

News from Scotland (1591) recounts the trial of Scottish witches from the town of Forres. The witches allegedly had attempted to kill James while

he was king of Scotland by trying to cause a shipwreck during his voyage to Denmark. The publication includes a woodcut of James, who had presided over the trial, personally interrogating the witches.

The weird sisters in *Macbeth* resemble these witches in their activity. Before Banquo and Macbeth encounter them in Act I, Scene 3, the weird sisters discuss sending tempestuous storms to a sailor's ship because his wife would not share her chestnuts with one of them. In addition, Banquo, just before he sees the weird sisters, asks Macbeth, "How far is't call'd to Forres?" (I.3.39). Thus, these weird sisters are linked to the witches in *News from Scotland* both by their behavior and their geographical location.

James himself wrote a work about witches called *Daemonologie* (1597). In this work, James discusses not only how witches operate and the extent of their power, but also their relationship to the Devil. According to James, the purpose of witches was to harm the king; thus, witchcraft was considered treason. Certainly, the witches in *Macbeth* wield considerable influence over the regicide of Duncan.

James also believed that witches were agents of the Devil who could bestow prophecies. Witches would use these prophecies to tempt the faith and virtue of men. Interestingly, the weird sisters tempt both Banquo and Macbeth in the play. Macbeth succumbs to his desires and ambitions while Banquo (supposedly James's ancestor) remains loyal and virtuous.

However, the presentation of the witches may not be as flattering to James as it appears. In his Bedford Cultural edition of the play, William C. Carroll notes that under James's influence, the Scottish people believed in and hunted witches. The English, on the other hand, were slightly more skeptical about the existence of witches. Obviously, the presence of a king who believed in witches caused a stir in England.

The controversy over the existence of witches may be reflected in this play. As Greenblatt points out in his introduction to *Macbeth* in the *Norton Shakespeare*, while these weird sisters seem to figure prominently, only Banquo and Macbeth see them or know of their existence and their role in the rise of Macbeth to the throne of Scotland. This obscurity, some critics argue, pushes them to the margins of the play. Thus, Shakespeare presents their influence and even existence ambiguously. Some modern critics have even speculated that they might be a psychic projection by Macbeth, though this would not explain why Banquo sees them as well.

Themes explored

Though *Macbeth* may be one of Shakespeare's most topical plays, with its strong links to current events in Jacobean England, it also explores a wide variety of themes that do not necessarily relate to specific events. For instance, Shakespeare explores a great number of dichotomies — or paired opposites — such as good and evil, order and disorder, reason and emotion, and reality and illusion. Using these dichotomies, he investigates themes related to human nature, ambition, gender, and the family.

Virtue versus evil

Many of the major characters in this play are virtuous; the major exceptions are the Macbeths. Macbeth begins as an admirable character whose loyalty to Duncan and military prowess gain him the title of Thane of Cawdor. However, upon hearing the prophecy of the weird sisters, he begins to contemplate the murder of Duncan. His thoughts turn to "horrible imaginings" (I.3.139).

By using the word "horrible" to describe his thoughts of regicide, Macbeth alerts us that he is acutely aware of the nature of his actions. He acknowledges more than once that Duncan does not deserve to die. In his first true soliloquy, Macbeth imagines that Duncan's "virtues / Will plead like angels trumpet-tongu'd against / The deep damnation of his taking-off" (I.7.18–20).

After killing Duncan, Macbeth initially is haunted by the horror of his actions and regards himself with repugnance. But he soon becomes more callous as his murder of innocents continues with Macduff's family. By the end of the play, his tyranny has reached its peak as he continues to destroy anyone who opposes him, including Young Siward. Through Macbeth's descent into tyranny, Shakespeare explores the power of evil and illustrates how it can use human ambition to consume a person.

Lady Macbeth presents a slightly different case study of evil. Like her husband, she clearly is not a virtuous character. But while Macbeth becomes increasingly evil and less sympathetic as the play progresses, Lady Macbeth moves in the opposite direction.

In the early stages of the play, when Macbeth hedges about whether to kill Duncan, Lady Macbeth convinces her indecisive husband to follow through with his plans. Greenblatt notes in his introduction to *Macbeth* in the *Norton Shakespeare* that she accomplishes this in two primary ways. First, she questions his masculinity by connecting his ability to murder Duncan with his manhood. She taunts her husband by asking him if he would prefer to "live a coward in thine own esteem" (I.7.43).

Second, Lady Macbeth is rhetorically much more vicious than her husband in her beliefs and her determination. In a statement that is often cited to demonstrate the evil nature of Lady Macbeth, she claims that she would willingly sacrifice her own child if she had sworn to do so. Despite their atrocity, these are only words. And despite being the primary force behind Macbeth's actions, Lady Macbeth ultimately seems to be more haunted by their deeds than Macbeth is. Unlike Macbeth, she cannot descend fully into evil.

After many murders have taken place, Lady Macbeth repeatedly sleepwalks, rubbing her hands in a vain effort to wash off a spot of blood that she sees continually. In exasperation, she asks, "[W]ill these hands ne'er be clean?" (V.1.38). Her mental struggles escalate, and Lady Macbeth eventually commits suicide, suggesting that her conscience provides her with a sort of redemption that Macbeth could never find.

Reason versus passion

During their debates over which course of action to take, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth use different persuasive strategies. Macbeth is very rational, contemplating the consequences and implications of his actions. He recognizes the political, ethical, and religious reasons why he should not commit regicide. In addition to jeopardizing his afterlife, Macbeth notes that regicide is a violation of Duncan's "double trust" that stems from Macbeth's bonds as a kinsman and as a subject (I.7.12).

Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, has a more passionate way of examining the pros and cons of killing Duncan. She is motivated by her feelings and uses emotional arguments to persuade her husband to commit the evil act. Interestingly, though she uses her zeal to convince her husband to kill Duncan, she adopts a detached and pragmatic view of their crimes after they are committed, while Macbeth becomes emotionally gripped with horror and repugnance. Lady Macbeth even returns the daggers to the king's bedchamber and smears blood on his servants to implicate them in the crime. From her perspective, "what's done is done" and need not be regretted (III.2.12).

Despite this initial detachment from guilt, Lady Macbeth ultimately is unequipped to deal with the consequences of their actions. Conversely, Macbeth initially reacts emotionally with repugnance and remorse but later reasons that "blood will have blood" (III.4.122). Macbeth coldly deduces that he must continue to act villainously in order to maintain his crown. His continued villainy is accompanied by a deadening of emotions. Macbeth realizes that he will be unable to clean himself of the crime

of regicide, saying that his hands could turn the green seas red (II.3.61–63). He reasons that, having chosen his course of action, "returning [would be] as tedious as go[ing] over" (III.4.138). The deadening of his emotions culminates in Act V when Macbeth greets news of his wife's death with no outward grief, saying that "[s]he should have died hereafter" (V.5.17).

Gender roles

Lady Macbeth is the focus of much of the exploration of gender roles in the play. As Lady Macbeth propels her husband toward committing Duncan's murder, she indicates that she must take on masculine characteristics. Her most famous speech addresses this issue. In Act I, Scene 5, after reading Macbeth's letter in which he details the witches' prophecy and informs her of Duncan's impending visit to their castle, Lady Macbeth indicates her desire to lose her feminine qualities and gain masculine ones. She cries, "Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts! unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe top full / Of direst cruelty" (I.5.38–41).

This request is part of what David Bevington, in his introduction to *Macbeth* in the fourth edition of the *Complete Works of Shakespeare*, sees as "sexual inversion" in the play. Clearly, gender is out of its traditional order. This disruption of gender roles is also presented through Lady Macbeth's usurpation of the dominant role in the Macbeth's marriage; on many occasions, she rules her husband and dictates his actions.

The disruption of gender roles is also represented in the weird sisters. Their very status as witches is a violation of how women were expected to behave in Early Modern England. The trio is perceived as violating nature, and despite their designation as sisters, the gender of these characters is also ambiguous. Upon encountering them, Banquo says, "You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so" (I.2.45–47). Their facial hair symbolizes their influence in the affairs of the male-dominated warrior society of Scotland. William C. Carroll, in his Bedford Cultural edition of *Macbeth,* sees the witches and the question of their gender as a device Shakespeare uses to criticizes the male-dominated culture, where titles are acquired through what Carroll describes as "murderous violence."

The weird sisters in a Savonlinna Opera Festival production, 1997. Clive Barda/PAL

Nature out of order

The disorder of nature, as well as gender, is a major theme in this play. The hierarchical view of the universe described in the "Introduction to Early Modern England" is violated and disrupted at almost every turn. The unnatural and disruptive death of the monarch is paralleled by equally violent disruptions in nature itself.

On the night of Duncan's death, the nobleman Lennox claims there were "Lamentings heard i' the air; strange screams of death / And prophecying with accents terrible / Of dire combustion and confus'd events / New hatch'd to the woeful time" (II.3.61–64). Many critics see this parallel between Duncan's death and disorder in nature as an affirmation of the divine right theory of kingship. As we witness in the play, Macbeth's murder of Duncan and his continued tyranny extends the disorder to the entire country.

Timeless tragedy

Though *Macbeth* is firmly rooted in the contexts of Early Modern England, this play remains timeless for its penetrating and extensive portrait of the evils that humans can commit. It depicts Macbeth's conscious decision to descend into evil and tyranny in the name of personal ambition, and it illustrates the disorders in politics, gender, nature, and religion that this decision causes.

Unlike many of Shakespeare's other tragic heroes, Macbeth feels the agony of his decision in the beginning rather than the end of his fall. Emotionally deadened by his actions, Macbeth ends the play with a terrible determination to fight against fate and die in the process. Moments before he dies offstage, he tells his foe, "Lay on, Macduff, / And damn'd be him that first cries, 'Hold enough!'" (V.8.33–34). Shakespeare's play reveals a great deal about the political, social, and theatrical beliefs and practices of Early Modern England. It also reveals a great deal about being human.

CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY