Deborah Curren-Aquino, who provides extensive editorial and production support; to Alice Falk for her expert copyediting; to Michael Poston for unfailing computer support; and to the staff of the Library's Research Division, especially Christina Certo (whose help is crucial), David Schalkwyk (Director of Research), Mimi Godfrey, Kathleen Lynch, Carol Brobeck, Owen Williams, Sarah Werner, and Adrienne Schevchuk. Among the editions we consulted, we found A. R. Braunmuller's New Cambridge edition especially useful. Finally, we once again express our thanks to Jean Miller for the wonderful images she has unearthed, and to the ever-supportive staff of the Library Reading Room.

Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine
2012

Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

In 1603, at about the middle of Shakespeare's career as a playwright, a new monarch ascended the throne of England. He was James VI of Scotland, who then also became James I of England. Immediately, Shakespeare's London was alive with an interest in things Scottish. Many Scots followed their king to London and attended the theaters there. Shakespeare's company, which became the King's Men under James's patronage, now sometimes staged their plays for the new monarch's entertainment, just as they had for Queen Elizabeth before him. It was probably within this context that Shakespeare turned to Raphael Holinshed's history of Scotland for material for a tragedy.

In Scottish history of the eleventh century, Shakespeare found a spectacle of violence—the slaughter of whole armies and of innocent families, the assassination of kings, the ambush of nobles by murderers, the brutal execution of rebels. He also came upon stories of witches and wizards providing advice to traitors. Such accounts could feed the new Scottish King James's belief in a connection between treason and witchcraft. James had already himself executed women as witches. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* supplied its audience with a sensational view of witches and supernatural apparitions and equally sensational accounts of bloody battles in which, for example, a rebel was "unseamed . . . from the nave [navel] to th' chops [jaws]."

It is possible, then, that in writing *Macbeth* Shakespeare was mainly intent upon appealing to the new interests in London brought about by James's kingship. What he created, though, is a play that has fascinated generations of readers and audiences that care

A Scottish king and his court.
From Raphael Holinshed, *The historie of Scotland* (1577).

little about Scottish history. In its depiction of a man who murders his king and kinsman in order to gain the crown, only to lose all that humans seem to need in order to be happy—sleep, nourishment, friends, love—*Macbeth* teases us with huge questions. Why do people do evil knowing that it is evil? Does Macbeth represent someone who murders because fate tempts him? because his wife pushes him into it? because he is overly ambitious? Having killed Duncan, why does Macbeth fall apart, unable to sleep, seeing ghosts, putting spies in everyone's home, killing his friends and innocent women and children? Why does the success of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth—prophesied by the witches, promising the couple power and riches and "peace to all their nights and days to come"—turn so quickly to ashes, destroying the Macbeths' relationship, their world, and, finally, both of them?

In earlier centuries, Macbeth's story was seen as a powerful study of a heroic individual who commits an evil act and pays an enormous price as his conscience—and the natural forces for good in the universe—destroy him. More recently, his story has been applied to nations that overreach themselves, his speeches of despair quoted to show that Shakespeare shared present-day feelings of alienation. Today, the line between Macbeth's evil and the supposed good of those who oppose him has been blurred, new attitudes about witches and witchcraft are being expressed, new questions raised about the ways that maleness and femaleness are portrayed in the play. Like so many of Shakespeare's plays, *Macbeth* speaks to each generation with a new voice.

After you have read the play, we invite you to read "*Macbeth:* A Modern Perspective" by the late Professor Susan Snyder of Swarthmore College.

Reading Shakespeare's Language: *Macbeth*

For many people today, reading Shakespeare's language can be a problem—but it is a problem that can be solved. Those who have studied Latin (or even French or German or Spanish) and those who are used to reading poetry will have little difficulty understanding the language of poetic drama. Others, however, need to develop the skills of untangling unusual sentence structures and of recognizing and understanding poetic compressions, omissions, and wordplay. And even those skilled in reading unusual sentence structures may have occasional trouble with Shakespeare's words. More than four hundred years of "static"—caused by changes in language and in life—intervene between his speaking and our hearing. Most of his vocabulary is still in use, but a few of his words are no longer used, and many of his words now have meanings quite different from those they had in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the theater, most of these difficulties are solved for us by actors who study the language and articulate it for us so that the essential meaning is heard—or, when combined with stage action, is at least *felt*. When we are reading on our own, we must do what each actor does: go over the lines (often with a dictionary close at hand) until the puzzles are solved and the lines yield up their poetry and the characters speak in words and phrases that are, suddenly, rewarding and wonderfully memorable.

Shakespeare's Words

As you begin to read the opening scenes of a Shakespeare play, you may notice occasional unfamiliar words. Some are unfamiliar simply because we no longer use them. In the opening scenes of *Macbeth*, for example, you will find the words *aroint thee* (begone), *coign* (corner), *anon* (immediately), *alarum* (a call to arms), *sewer* (butler), and *hautboy* (a very loud wind instrument designed for outdoor ceremonials, the forerunner of the orchestral oboe). Words of this kind are explained in notes to the text and will become familiar the more Shakespeare plays you read.

In *Macbeth*, as in all of Shakespeare's writing, more problematic are the words that are still in use but that now have different meanings. In the second scene of *Macbeth* we find the words *composition* (meaning "terms of peace") and *present* (meaning "immediate"); in the third scene, *choppy* is used where we would use "chapped" or "wrinkled," *addition* where we would use "title"; in the seventh scene, *receipt* is used to mean "container." Again, such words will be explained in the notes to the text, but they, too, will become familiar as you continue to read Shakespeare's language.

Some words are strange not because of the "static" introduced by changes in language over the past centuries but because these are words that Shakespeare is using to build a dramatic world that has its own space, time, and history. *Macbeth*, for example, builds, in its opening scenes, a location and a past history by references to "the Western Isles," to "thanes," "Sinel," "Glamis," and "Cawdor," to "kerns and gallowglasses," to "the Weïrd Sisters," to "Norweyan ranks," to "Inverness" and "Saint Colme's Inch." These "local" references build the Scotland that Macbeth and Lady

Macbeth inhabit and will become increasingly familiar to you as you get further into the play.

Shakespeare's Sentences

In an English sentence, meaning is quite dependent on the place given each word. "The dog bit the boy" and "The boy bit the dog" mean very different things, even though the individual words are the same. Because English places such importance on the positions of words in sentences, on the way words are arranged, unusual arrangements can puzzle a reader. Shakespeare frequently shifts his sentences away from "normal" English arrangements—often in order to create the rhythm he seeks, sometimes to use a line's poetic rhythm to emphasize a particular word, sometimes to give a character his or her own speech patterns or to allow the character to speak in a special way. When we attend a good performance of the play, the actors will have worked out the sentence structures and will articulate the sentences so that the meaning is clear. When reading the play, we need to do as the actor does: that is, when puzzled by a character's speech, check to see if the words are being presented in an unusual sequence.

Often Shakespeare rearranges subjects and verbs (i.e., instead of "He goes," we find "Goes he"). In the opening scenes of *Macbeth*, when Ross says (1.3.101–2) "As thick as tale / Came post with post," and when the witch says (1.3.24) "Shall he dwindle, peak, and pine," they are using constructions that place the subject and verb in unusual positions. The "normal" order would be "Post with post came as thick as tale" and "He shall dwindle. . . ." Shakespeare also frequently places the object before the subject and verb (i.e., instead of "I hit him," we might find "Him I hit"). Banquo's statement to the Weïrd Sisters at 1.3.57–58, "My noble partner /

You greet with present grace and great prediction," is an example of such an inversion. (The normal order would be "You greet my noble partner with present grace and great prediction.") Lady Macbeth uses such an inverted structure in 1.7.73–74 when she says to Macbeth, "his two chamberlains / Will I with wine and wassail . . . convince" (where the "normal" structure would be "I will convince [i.e., overpower] his two chamberlains with wine and wassail").

In some plays Shakespeare makes systematic use of inversions (*Julius Caesar* is one such play). In *Macbeth,* he more often uses a different kind of unusual sentence structure, one that depends on the separation of words that would normally appear together. (Again, this is often done to create a particular rhythm or to stress a particular word.) Malcolm's "This is the sergeant / Who, like a good and hardy soldier, fought / 'Gainst my captivity" (1.2.4–6) separates the subject and verb ("who fought"); the Captain's "No sooner justice had, with valor armed, / Compelled these skipping kerns to trust their heels" (1.2.32–33) interrupts the two parts of the verb "had compelled" (at the same time that it inverts the subject and verb; the normal order would be "No sooner had justice compelled . . ."); a few lines later, the Captain's "the Norweyan lord, surveying vantage, / With furbished arms and new supplies of men, / Began a fresh assault" (1.2.34–36) separates the subject and verb ("lord began") with, first, a participial phrase and then a lengthy prepositional phrase. In order to create for yourself sentences that seem more like the English of everyday speech, you may wish to rearrange the words, putting together the word clusters and placing the remaining words in their more familiar order. You will usually find that the sentences will gain in clarity but will lose their rhythm or shift their emphases.

Locating and, if necessary, rearranging words that

"belong together" is especially necessary in passages that separate subjects from verbs and verbs from objects by long delaying or expanding interruptions—a structure that is used frequently in *Macbeth.* For example, when the Captain, at 1.2.11–25, tells the story of Macbeth's fight against the rebel Macdonwald, he uses a series of such interrupted constructions:

> *The merciless Macdonwald*
> (Worthy to be a rebel, for to that
> The multiplying villainies of nature
> Do swarm upon him) from the Western Isles
> Of kerns and gallowglasses *is supplied*. . . .
> . . .
> But all's too weak;
> For *brave Macbeth* (well he deserves that name),
> Disdaining Fortune, with his brandished steel,
> Which smoked with bloody execution,
> Like Valor's minion, *carved out his passage* . . .

Here the interruptions provide details that catch the audience up in the Captain's story. The separation of the basic sentence elements "the merciless Macdonwald is supplied" forces the audience to attend to supporting details (of why he is worthy to be called a villain, of how he has been supplied with soldiers from the Western Isles) while waiting for the basic sentence elements to come together. A similar effect is created when "brave Macbeth carved out his passage" is interrupted by a clause commenting on the word "brave" ("well he deserves that name"), by a phrase that describes Macbeth's mood ("Disdaining Fortune"), and by two further phrases, one of them the complex "with his brandished steel / Which smoked with bloody execution," and one of them—"Like Valor's minion"—simple in structure but a richly rhetorical figure that makes Macbeth the chosen darling of Valor.

Occasionally, rather than separating basic sentence elements, Shakespeare simply holds them back, delaying them until much subordinate material has already been given. Lady Macbeth uses an inverted structure that provides this kind of delay when she says, at 1.6.22–24, "For those of old, / And the late dignities heaped up to them, / We rest your hermits" (where a "normally" constructed English sentence would have begun with the basic sentence elements "We rest your hermits"); Macbeth, in his famous soliloquy at 1.7.1–28, uses a delayed construction when he says (lines 2–7), "If th' assassination / Could trammel up the consequence and catch / With his surcease success, that but this blow / Might be the be-all and the end-all here, / But here, upon this bank and shoal of time, / We'd jump the life to come" (where the basic sentence elements "We'd jump the life to come" are delayed to the end of the very long sentence).

Shakespeare's sentences are sometimes complicated not because of unusual structures or interruptions or delays but because he omits words and parts of words that English sentences normally require. (In conversation, we, too, often omit words. We say, "Heard from him yet?" and our hearer supplies the missing "Have you." Frequent reading of Shakespeare—and of other poets—trains us to supply such missing words.) In *Macbeth,* Shakespeare uses omissions to great dramatic effect. At 1.3.105–8, Angus says to Macbeth, "We are sent / To give thee from our royal master thanks, / [We are sent] Only to herald thee into his sight, / Not [to] pay thee" (the omitted words, shown in brackets, add clarity but slow the speech). At 1.4.48–49, Duncan's cryptic "From hence to Inverness / And bind us further to you" would read, if the missing words were supplied, "Let us go from hence to Inverness, and may this visit bind us further to you." Lady Macbeth's soliloquy, at 1.5.18–20, would read, with the omitted subjects and verbs in place, "Thou wouldst be great, / [Thou] Art not without ambition, but [thou art] without / The illness [that] should attend it." Later in the scene, at 1.5.51–54, she again omits words in saying, "Stop up th' access and passage to remorse, / [So] That no compunctious visitings of nature / [Will] Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between / Th' effect and it," and again at 1.7.80–82, where she asks Macbeth, "What [can]not [you and I] put upon / His spongy officers, who shall bear the guilt / Of our great quell?" In reading *Macbeth* one should stay alert for omitted words, since Shakespeare so often uses this device to build compression and speed in the language of this play.

Shakespearean Wordplay

Shakespeare plays with language so often and so variously that books are written on the topic. Here we will mention only two kinds of wordplay, puns and metaphors. A pun is a play on words that sound the same but have different meanings. In many plays (*Romeo and Juliet* is a good example) Shakespeare uses puns frequently; in *Macbeth* they are rarely found (except in such serious "punning" as Macbeth's "If it were done when 'tis done . . ." [1.7.1–2]). More such serious punning occurs in the exchange between Donalbain and Macbeth just after Duncan's murder. To Donalbain's request for information, "What is amiss?" (i.e., what's wrong?), Macbeth responds, "You are," punning on *amiss* as "damaged" (2.3.113–14). Perhaps the play's most famous (and the most shocking) pun is Lady Macbeth's "If he do bleed, / I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal, / For it must seem their guilt" (2.2.71–73), where she seems to be playing with the

double meaning of *guilt/gilt*. Such wordplay is rare in *Macbeth*.

Metaphor, though, fills the play. A metaphor is a play on words in which one object or idea is expressed as if it were something else, something with which it is said to share common features. For instance, when Lady Macbeth says (1.5.28–29) "Hie thee hither, / That I may pour my spirits in thine ear," she is using metaphoric language: the words that she wants to say to Macbeth are compared to a liquid that can be poured in the ear. Metaphors are often used when the idea being conveyed is hard to express; through metaphor, the speaker is given language that helps to carry the idea or the feeling to his or her listener—and to the audience. Lady Macbeth uses metaphor to convey her contempt for Macbeth's cowardice (1.7.39–42): "Was the hope drunk / Wherein you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since? / And wakes it now, to look so green and pale / At what it did so freely?" And Macbeth expresses his own lack of valid motivation before the murder through a complex metaphor in which his "intent" is a horse and ambition is the knight preparing to ride the horse (1.7.25–27): "I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself. . . ."

Macbeth's Language

Each of Shakespeare's plays has its own characteristic language. The range of registers in *Macbeth*'s language, along with the denseness of its poetry, has attracted considerable critical attention. (See, e.g., "'What do you mean?': The Languages of *Macbeth*," in A. R. Braunmuller's New Cambridge edition of the play [updated edition, 2008, pages 43–55].) We would note here in

particular the deliberate imprecision of some of the play's words. Macbeth's lines (1.7.1–2) "If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well / It were done quickly" not only play with the imprecise verb "done" but also refer to some unnamed "it." In the next sentence, we learn that "it" is "th' assassination" (a word that Shakespeare invents for this play)—but the imprecision is characteristic of *Macbeth*'s language. We hear it again in Lady Macbeth's "Wouldst thou have that / Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life / And live a coward in thine own esteem . . . ?" (1.7.45–47), where "that which thou esteem'st the ornament of life" is, perhaps, the crown—or, perhaps, the kingship. The sense is clear, but the language seems deliberately vague, deliberately flowery, as if designed to cover over the serpent under it. Macbeth's prayer (3.2.52–56) that night use its "bloody and invisible hand" to "cancel and tear to pieces that great bond / Which keeps me pale" is a precisely relevant example of the kind of resonant imprecision that characterizes this play. (See longer note to 3.2.55, page 195.)

Implied Stage Action

Finally, in reading Shakespeare's plays we should always remember that what we are reading is a performance script. The dialogue is written to be spoken by actors who, at the same time, are moving, gesturing, picking up objects, weeping, shaking their fists. Some stage action is described in what are called "stage directions"; some is suggested within the dialogue itself. We must learn to be alert to such signals as we stage the play in our imaginations. When, in the third scene of *Macbeth*, Banquo says (1.3.44–47), "You seem to understand me / By each at once her choppy finger laying / Upon her skinny lips," the stage action

is obvious. Again, his words to Macbeth (1.3.54–55), "Good sir, why do you start and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair?," indicate that the actor playing Macbeth gestures in a fairly obvious way. It is less easy later in the scene to imagine exactly what is to take place just before Banquo says (1.3.82–83), "The earth hath bubbles, as the water has, / And these are of them. Whither are they vanished?" The director and the actors (and the reader, in imagination) must decide just how the witches melt "Like breath into the wind." The battle scenes in the fifth act of the play present a different kind of challenge to the reader's imagination, as Malcolm's army becomes a marching forest, and as Macbeth arms for battle, hears the ominous cry of women, kills young Siward, and then goes to meet his fate on the sword of Macduff. Learning to read the language of stage action repays one many times over when one reaches a crucial scene like that of the banquet and its appearing and disappearing ghost (3.4) or that of the final duel in 5.8—scenes in which implied stage action vitally affects our response to the play.

It is immensely rewarding to work carefully with Shakespeare's language so that the words, the sentences, the wordplay, and the implied stage action all become clear—as readers for the past four centuries have discovered. It may be more pleasurable to attend a good performance of a play—though not everyone has thought so. But the joy of being able to stage one of Shakespeare's plays in one's imagination, to return to passages that continue to yield further meanings (or further questions) the more one reads them—these are pleasures that, for many, rival (or at least augment) those of the performed text, and certainly make it worth considerable effort to "break the code" of Elizabethan poetic drama and let free the remarkable language that makes up a Shakespeare text.

Shakespeare's Life

Surviving documents that give us glimpses into the life of William Shakespeare show us a playwright, poet, and actor who grew up in the market town of Stratford-upon-Avon, spent his professional life in London, and returned to Stratford a wealthy landowner. He was born in April 1564, died in April 1616, and is buried inside the chancel of Holy Trinity Church in Stratford.

We wish we could know more about the life of the world's greatest dramatist. His plays and poems are testaments to his wide reading—especially to his knowledge of Virgil, Ovid, Plutarch, Holinshed's *Chronicles*, and the Bible—and to his mastery of the English language, but we can only speculate about his education. We know that the King's New School in Stratford-upon-Avon was considered excellent. The school was one of the English "grammar schools" established to educate young men, primarily in Latin grammar and literature. As in other schools of the time, students began their studies at the age of four or five in the attached "petty school," and there learned to read and write in English, studying primarily the catechism from the Book of Common Prayer. After two years in the petty school, students entered the lower form (grade) of the grammar school, where they began the serious study of Latin grammar and Latin texts that would occupy most of the remainder of their school days. (Several Latin texts that Shakespeare used repeatedly in writing his plays and poems were texts that schoolboys memorized and recited.) Latin comedies were introduced early in the lower form; in the upper form, which the boys entered at age ten or eleven, students wrote their own Latin orations and declamations, studied Latin