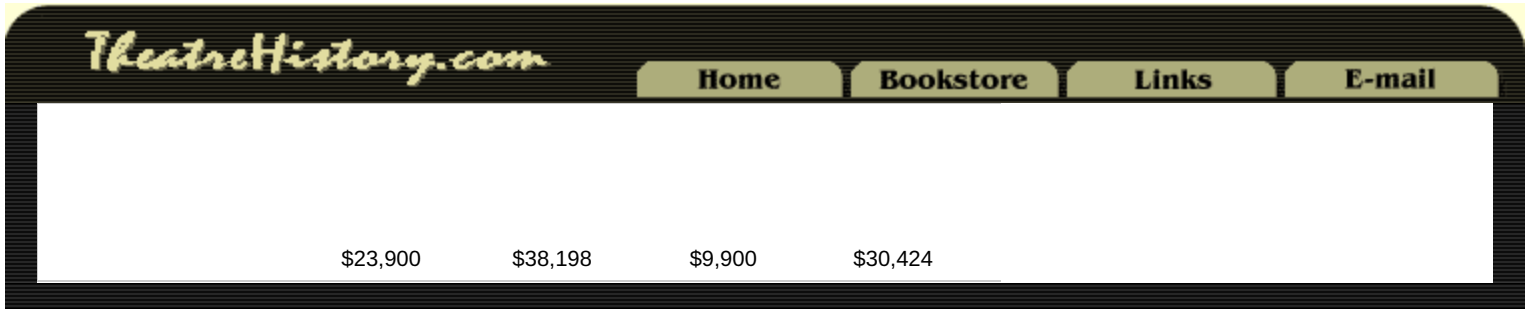
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MACBETH

An analysis of the play by Shakespeare

The following article was originally published in The Drama: Its History, Literature and Influence on Civilization, vol. 14. ed. Alfred Bates. London: Historical Publishing Company, 1906. pp. 34-39.

THE THREE WITCHES, 1827
A painting by Alexandre-Marie Colin

If *Hamlet* is the grandest of Shakespeare's plays, *Macbeth* is from a tragic standpoint the most sublime and the most impressive as an acting play. Nothing so terrible has been written since the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus, and nothing in dramatic literature--not even the slaying of Agamemnon--is depicted with such awesome intensity as the murder of Duncan. The witches are not, it is true, the divine Eumenides; they are not intended to be so; they are ignoble and vulgar instruments of hell, and the German poet who transformed them into a mixture of fates, furies and enchantresses, clothing them with tragic dignity, very ill understood their meaning.

Whether the age of Shakespeare still believed in ghosts and witches is a matter of perfect indifference for the justification of the use which, in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, he has made of preëxisting traditions. No superstition can be widely diffused without having a foundation in

human nature; on this the poet builds; he calls up from their hidden abysses that dread of the unknown, that presage of a dark side of nature and a world of spirits, which philosophy now imagines it has altogether exploded.

These repulsive hags, from which the imagination shrinks, are here emblems of the hostile powers which operate in nature; and the repugnance of our senses is outweighed by the mental horror. With one another they discourse like women of the very lowest class; for this was the class to which they were ordinarily supposed to belong; when, however, they address Macbeth, they assume a loftier tone; their predictions, which they either themselves pronounce or allow their apparitions to deliver, have all the obscure brevity, the majestic solemnity of oracles. They are governed by an invisible spirit, or the operation of such great and dreadful events would be above their sphere. With what intent did Shakespeare assign the same place to them in his play which they occupy in the history of Macbeth as related in the old chronicles? A monstrous crime is committed; Duncan, a venerable old man, and the best of kings, is, in defenseless sleep, under the hospital's roof, murdered by his subject, whom he has loaded with honors and rewards. Natural motives alone seem inadequate, or the perpetrator must have been portrayed as a hardened villain. Shakespeare wished to exhibit a more sublime picture--an ambitious but noble hero, yielding to a deep-laid hellish temptation, and in whom all the crimes to which, in order to secure the fruits of his first crime, he is impelled by necessity, cannot altogether eradicate the stamp of native heroism. He has, therefore, given a threefold division to the guilt of that crime. The first idea comes from beings whose whole activity is guided by the lust of wickedness. The weird sisters surprise Macbeth in the moment of intoxication of victory, when his love of glory has been gratified; they cheat his eyes by exhibiting to him as the work of fate what in reality can only be accomplished by his own deed, and gain credence for all their words by the immediate fulfillment of the first prediction.

The opportunity of murdering the king immediately offers; the wife of Macbeth conjures him not to let it slip; she urges him on with a fiery

eloquence, which has at command all those sophisms that serve to throw a false splendor over crime. Little more than the mere execution falls to the share of Macbeth; he is driven into it, as it were, in a tumult of fascination. Repentance immediately follows, nay, even precedes the deed, and the stings of conscience leave him rest neither night nor day. But he is now fairly entangled in the snares of hell. That same Macbeth, who once as a warrior could spurn at death, now that he dreads the prospect of the life to come, clings with growing anxiety to his earthly existence the more miserable it becomes, and pitilessly removes out of the way whatever to his dark and suspicious mind seems to threaten danger. However much we may abhor his actions, we cannot altogether refuse to compassionate the state of his mind; we lament the ruin of so many noble qualities, and even in his last defense we are compelled to admire the struggle of a brave will with a cowardly conscience.

Lady Macbeth, who of all the human participators in the king's murder is the most guilty, is thrown by the terrors of her conscience into a state of incurable bodily and mental disease; she dies, unlamented even by her husband. Macbeth is still found worthy to die the death of a hero on the field of battle. The noble Macduff is allowed the satisfaction of saving his country by punishing with his own hand the tyrant who had murdered his wife and children. Banquo, by an early death, atones for his ambitious curiosity to know his glorious descendants, as he thereby has roused Macbeth's jealousy; but he preserves his mind pure from the evil suggestions of the witches; his name is blessed in his race, destined to enjoy for a long succession of ages that royal dignity which Macbeth could only hold for his own life.

In the progress of the action, this play is the reverse of *Hamlet;* it strides forward with amazing rapidity from the first catastrophe to the last. The precise duration of the action cannot be ascertained--years, perhaps, according to the story--but to the imagination the most crowded time appears always the shortest. Here we can hardly conceive how so much could have been compressed into so narrow a space, and not merely external events, for the very inmost recesses in the minds of the dramatic personages are laid open to us. It is as if the

drags were taken from the wheels of time, and they rolled along without interruption in their descent.

The play is also of historic interest, its incidents dating back to the days of Edward the Confessor. There were sufficient materials for the drama in Holinshed's *History of Scotland*; but with these Shakespeare has blended another story--that of the murder of King Duff by Donwald and his wife in Donwald's castle. "The king got him into his privy chamber, only with two of his chamberlains, who, having brought him to bed, came forth again, and then fell to banqueting with Donwald and his wife, who had prepared divers delicate dishes and sundry sorts of drinks for their supper, whereat they sat up so long, till they had charged their stomachs with such full gorges, that their heads no sooner got to the pillow but asleep they were so fast that a man might have removed the chamber over them sooner than to have awaked them out of their drunken sleep."

"Then Donwald, though he abhorred the act greatly in heart, yet through instigation of his wife he called four of his servants unto him, whom he had made privy to his wicked intent before, and framed to his purpose with large gifts, and now declaring unto them after what sort they should work the feat, they gladly obeyed his instructions, and speedily going about the murder, they enter the chamber in which the king lay a little before cock's crow, where they secretly cut his throat as he lay sleeping, without any bustling at all; and immediately by a postern gate they carried forth the dead body into the fields."

The History of Macbeth

The following article was originally published in Shakespeare's Tragedy of Macbeth. Ed. William J. Rolfe. New York: American Book Co., 1918.

Macbeth was first printed in the folio of 1623, where it occupies pages 131 to 151 inclusive, in the division of "Tragedies." It was registered in the books of the Stationers' Company, on the 8th of November, 1623, by Blount and Jaggard, the publishers of the folio, as one of the plays "not formerly entered to other men." It was written between 1604 and 1610; the former limit being fixed by the allusion to the

union of England and Scotland under James I, and the latter by the MS. Diary of Dr. Simon Forman, who saw the play performed "at the Globe, 1610, the 20th of April, Saturday." It may then have been a new play, but it is more probable, as nearly all critics agree, that it was written in 1605 or 1606. The accession of James made Scottish subjects popular in England, and the tale of *Macbeth and Banquo* would be one of the first to be brought forward, as Banquo was held to be an ancestor of the new king. A Latin "interlude" on this subject was performed at Oxford in 1605, on the occasion of the king's visit to the city; but there is no reason for supposing that Shakespeare got the hint of his tragedy from that source.

It is barely possible that there was an earlier play on the subject of macbeth. Collier finds in the Registers of the Stationers' Company, under the date of August 27, 1596, the entry of a *Ballad of Makdobeth*, which he gives plausible reasons for supposing to have been a drama, and not a "ballad" properly so called. There appears to be a reference to the same piece in Kemp's *Nine Days*' *Wonder*, printed in 1600, where it is called a "miserable stolne story," and said to be the work of "a penny Poet."

George Steevens maintained that Shakespeare was indebted, in the supernatural parts of *Macbeth*, to *The Witch*, a play by Thomas Middleton, which was discovered in manuscript towards the end of the eighteenth century. Malone at first took the same view of the subject, but finally came to the conclusion that Middleton's play was the later production, and that he must therefore be the plagiarist. The Clarendon Press editors take the ground that there are portions of *Macbeth* which Shakespeare did not write; that these were interpolated after the poet's death, or at least after he had ceased to be connected with the theatre; and that "the interpolator was, not improbably, Thomas Middleton."

These views have found little favour with other Shakespearian critics. A more satisfactory explanation of the imperfections of the play ascribes them to the haste with which it was written. Richard Grant White, who refers its composition to "the period between October,

1604, and August, 1605," remarks: "I am the more inclined to this opinion from the indications which the play itself affords that it was produced upon an emergency. It exhibits throughout the hasty execution of a grand and clearly conceived design. But the haste is that of a master of his art, who, with conscious command of its resources, and in the frenzy of a grand inspiration, works out his composition to its minutest detail of essential form, leaving the work of surface finish for the occupation of cooler leisure. What the Sistine Madonna was to Raphael, it seems that *Macbeth* was to Shakespeare--a magnificent impromptu; that kind of impromptu which results from the application of well-disciplined powers and rich stores of thought to subject suggested by occasion. I am inclined to regard *Macbeth* as, for the most part, a specimen of Shakespeare's unelaborated, if not unfinished, writing, in the maturity and highest vitality of his genius. It abounds in instances of extremest compression and most daring ellipsis, while it exhibits in every scene a union of supreme dramatic and poetic power, and in almost every line an imperially irresponsible control of language. Hence, I think, its lack of completeness of versification in certain passages, and also some of the imperfection of the text, the thought in which the compositors were not always able to follow and apprehend."

The Character of Macbeth

The following article was originally published in *Remarks on Some Characters of Shakespere*. Thomas Whately. London: Parker, 1839.

The first thought of acceding to the throne is suggested, and success in the attempt is promised, to Macbeth by the witches; he is therefore represented as a man whose natural temper would have deterred him from such a design if he had not been immediately tempted and strongly impelled to it.

A distinction [between *Richard III* and *Macbeth*] is made in the article of courage, though both are possessed of it even to an eminent degree; but in Richard it is intrepidity, and in Macbeth no more than resolution: in him it proceeds from exertion, not from nature; in enterprise he betrays a degree of fear, though he is able, when

occasion requires, to stifle and subdue it. When he and his wife are concerting the murder, his doubt, 'If we should fail,' is a difficulty raised by apprehension; and as soon as that is removed by the contrivance of Lady Macbeth, he runs with violence into the other extreme of confidence. His question: 'Will it not be receiv'd,' &c., proceeds from that extravagance with which a delivery from apprehension and doubt is always accompanied. Then summoning all his fortitude, he proceeds to the bloody business without any further recoils. But a certain degree of restlessness and anxiety still continues, such as is constantly felt by a man not naturally very bold, worked up to a momentous achievement. His imagination dwells entirely on the circumstances of horror which surround him; the vision of the dagger; the darkness and the stillness of the night, etc... A resolution thus forced cannot hold longer than the immediate occasion for it: the moment after that is accomplished for which it was necessary, his thoughts take the contrary turn, and he cries out in agony and despair. He refuses to return to the chamber and complete his work. His disordered senses deceive him; he owns that 'every noise appals him.' He listens when nothing stirs; he mistakes the sounds he does hear; he is so confused, as not to distinguish whence the knocking proceeds. She, who is more calm, knows that it is at the south entry; she gives clear and distinct answers to all his incoherent questions, but he returns none to that which she puts to him. All his answers to the trivial questions of Lenox and Macduff are evidently given by a man thinking of something else; and by taking a tincture from the subject of his attention, they become equivocal.

Macbeth commits subsequent murders with less agitation than that of Duncan; but this is no inconsistency in his character; on the contrary, it confirms the principles upon which it is formed; for, besides his being hardened to the deeds of death, he is impelled by other motives than those which instigated him to assassinate his sovereign. In the one he sought to gratify his ambition; the rest are for his security; and he gets rid of fear by guilt, which, to a mind so constituted, may be the less uneasy sensation of the two. The anxiety which prompts him to the destruction of Banquo arises entirely from apprehension. For though one principle reason of his jealousy was the prophecy of the

witches in favour of Banquo's issue, yet here starts forth another quite consistent with a temper not quite free from timidity. He is afraid of him personally; that fear is founded on the superior courage of the other, and he feels himself under an awe before him; a situation which a dauntless spirit can never get into. So great are these terrors that he betrays them to the murderers. As the murder is for his own security, the same apprehension which checked him in his designs upon Duncan, impel him to this upon Banquo.

Macbeth is always shaken upon great, and frequently alarmed upon trivial, occasions. Upon meeting the Witches, he is agitated much more than Banquo, who speaks to them first, and, the moment he sees them, asks them several particular and pertinent questions. But Macbeth, though he has had time to recollect himself, only repeats the same inquiry shortly, and bids them 'Speak, if you can:--What are you?' Which parts may appear to be injudiciously distributed; Macbeth being the principal personage in the play, and most immediately concerned in this particular scene, and it being to him that the Witches first address themselves. But the difference in their character accounts for such a distribution. Banquo's contemptuous defiance of the Witches seemed so bold to Macbeth, that he long after mentions it as an instance of his dauntless spirit, when he recollects that he 'chid the sisters.'

Macbeth has an acquired, though not a constitutional, courage, which is equal to all ordinary occasions; and if it fails him upon those which are extraordinary, it is however so well formed, as to be easily resumed as soon as the shock is over. But his idea never rises above manliness of character, and he continually asserts his right to that character; which he would not do if he did not take to himself a merit in supporting it. See I, vii, 46. Upon the first appearance of Banquo's ghost, Lady Macbeth endeavors to recover him from his terror by summoning this consideration to his view: 'Are you a man,' 'Aye, and a bold one,' &c. He puts in the same claim again, upon the ghost's rising again, and says, 'What man dare, I dare,' &c., and on its disappearing finally, he says, 'I am a man again.' And even at the last, when he finds that the prophecy in which he had confided has deceived him by its

equivocation, he says that 'it hath cow'd my better part of man.' In all which passages he is apparently shaken out of that character to which he had formed himself, but for which he relied only on exertion of courage, without supposing insensibility to fear.

Macbeth wants no disguise of his natural disposition, for it is not bad; he does not affect more piety than he has: on the contrary, a part of his distress arises from a real sense of religion: which makes him regret that he could not join the chamberlains in prayer for God's blessing, and bewail that he has 'given his eternal jewel to the common enemy of man.' He continually reproaches himself for his deeds; no use can harden him: confidence cannot silence, and even despair cannot stifle, the cries of his conscience. By the first murder he put 'rancours in the vessel of his peace;' and of the last he owns to Macduff, 'My soul is too much charg'd With blood of thine already.'

Against Banquo he acts with more determination, for the reasons which have been given: and yet he most unnecessarily acquaints the murderers with the reasons of his conduct; and even informs them of the behaviour he proposes to observe afterwards, see III, i, 117-123; which particularly and explanation to men who did not desire it; the confidence he places in those who could only abuse it; and the very needless caution of secrecy implied in this speech, are so many symptoms of a feeble mind; which again appears, when, after they had undertaken the business, he bids them 'resolve themselves apart;' and thereby leaves them an opportunity to retract, if they had not been more determined than he is, who supposes time to be requisite for settling such resolutions. His sending a third murderer to join the others, just at the moment of action, and without notice, is a further proof of the same imbecility.

Besides the proofs which have been given of these weaknesses in his character, through the whole conduct of his designs against Duncan and Banquo, another may be drawn from his attempt upon Macduff, whom he first sends for without acquainting Lady Macbeth of his intention, then betrays the secret, by asking her after the company have risen from the banquet, 'How say'st thou, that Macduff denies his

person At our great bidding?' 'Did you send to him, sir?' 'I hear it by the way: but I will send.' The time of making this enquiry when it has no relation to what has just passed otherwise than as his apprehension might connect it; the addressing of the question to her, who, as appears from what she says, knew nothing of the matter--and his awkward attempt then to disguise it, are strong evidence of the disorder of his mind.

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