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Symboles

posted Aug 2, 2013, 8:43 AM by alaa hagag **[updated Aug 2, 2013, 9:00 AM]**

Blood

Blood is everywhere in *Macbeth*, beginning with the opening battle between the Scots and the Norwegian invaders, which is described in harrowing terms by the wounded captain in Act 1, scene 2. Once Macbeth and Lady Macbeth embark upon their murderous journey, blood comes to symbolize their guilt, and they begin to feel that their crimes have stained them in a way that cannot be washed clean. “Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?” Macbeth cries after he has killed Duncan, even as his wife scolds him and says that a little water will do the job (2.2.58–59). Later, though, she comes to share his horrified sense of being stained: “Out, damned spot; out, I say . . . who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?” she asks as she wanders through the halls of their castle near the close of the play (5.1.30–34). Blood symbolizes the guilt that sits like a permanent stain on the consciences of both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, one that hounds them to their graves.

The Weather

As in other Shakespearean tragedies, Macbeth’s grotesque murder spree is accompanied by a number of unnatural occurrences in the natural realm. From the thunder and lightning that accompany the witches’ appearances to the terrible storms that rage on the night of Duncan’s murder, these violations of the natural order reflect corruption in the moral and political orders.

Visions and Hallucinations

A number of times in Macbeth, Macbeth sees or hears strange things: the floating dagger, the voice that says he's murdering sleep, and Banquo's ghost. As Macbeth himself wonders about

the dagger, are these sights and sounds supernatural visions or figments of his guilty imagination? The play contains no definitive answer, which is itself a kind of answer: they're both. Macbeth is a man at war with himself, his innate honor battling his ambition. Just as nature goes haywire when the normal natural order is ruptured, Macbeth's own mind does the same when it is forced to fight against itself.

Sleep

When he murders Duncan, Macbeth thinks he hears a voice say "Macbeth does murder sleep" (2.2.34). Sleep symbolizes innocence, purity, and peace of mind, and in killing Duncan Macbeth actually does murder sleep: Lady Macbeth begins to sleepwalk, and Macbeth is haunted by his nightmares.

Nature

Throughout Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the weather plays an important role. The rebelling nature of wind and lightning indicates the disruption within the natural order of society. It makes it seem as if the weather is upset with Macbeth's actions. In many Shakespearean plays — including this one — rebelling nature shows a departure from accepted political and moral order.

Clothing

The way these characters keep talking about clothes, you'd think there was a 30% off sale at Old Navy. But clothes aren't just keeping the nobles warm in their drafty candles; they're also functioning symbolically to represent these people's stations in life—earned, or stolen.

When Macbeth first hears that he's been named the Thane of Cawdor, he asks Angus why he is being dressed in "borrowed" robes (1.3.7). Macbeth doesn't literally mean that he's going to wear the old thane's hand-me-down clothing. Here, "robes" is a metaphor for the title (Thane of Cawdor) that Macbeth doesn't think belongs to him. And later, Angus says that Macbeth's kingly "title" is ill-fitting and hangs on him rather loosely, "like a giant's robe / Upon a dwarfish thief" (5.2.2).

Angus isn't accusing Macbeth of stealing and wearing the old king's favorite jacket, he's accusing Macbeth of stealing the king's power (by killing him) and then parading around with the king's title, which doesn't seem to suit him at all. Famous literary critic Cleanth Brooks has

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something to say about that image:

The crucial point of the comparison, it seems to me, lies not in the smallness of the man and the largeness of the robes, but rather in the fact that—whether the man be large or small—these are not his garments; in Macbeth's case they are actually stolen garments. Macbeth is uncomfortable in them because he is continually conscious of the fact that they do not belong to him. There is a further point, and it is one of the utmost importance; the oldest symbol for the hypocrite is that of a man who cloaks his true nature under a disguise. (source, 48)

Keep an eye out in the play for other times when clothing shows up—or even cloth in general. Like those banners Macbeth hangs right before battle; does he actually believe they're going to help?

Dead Children

This play, unfortunately, is full of dead babies and slain children. And it's hard to make jokes about that, even if they are fictional and several hundred years old. The witches throw into their cauldron a "finger of birth-strangled babe" and then conjure an apparition of a bloody child that says Macbeth will not be harmed by any man "of woman born" (4.1.2); Fleance witnesses his father's murder before nearly being killed himself; Macbeth kills Young Siward; and Macduff's young son, his "pretty chicken," is called an "egg" before he's murdered.

So, what's the deal?

The play is fixated on what happens when family lines are extinguished, which is exactly what Macbeth has in mind when he orders the murders of his enemies' children. (His willingness to kill kids, by the way, is a clear sign that he's passed the point of no return.) We can trace all of this back to Macbeth's anger that Banquo's "children shall be kings" (1.3.5), but not Macbeth's: he laments that, when the witches predicted he would be king, they placed a "fruitless crown" upon his head and a "barren scepter" in his hands (3.1.8).

There's also a sense of major political and lineal disorder here. When Macbeth kills Duncan and takes the crown, Malcolm (King Duncan's heir) is denied "the due of birth" (3.6.1). By the play's end, order is restored with the promise of Malcolm being crowned as rightful king. And, we also know that Banquo's line will rule for generations to come. It's fitting that, in the end, Macbeth is killed by a man who was "untimely ripped" from his mother's womb.

Eight Kings

When Macbeth visits the weird sisters and demands to know whether or not Banquo's heirs will become kings, the witches conjure a vision of eight kings, the last of which holds a mirror that reflects many more such kings. Cool vision, right?

Not to Macbeth. See, these are *Banquo*'s heirs, which means that Macbeth's sons aren't going to become king which means Macbeth had better watch his back.

But it would have been pretty cool to Shakespeare's audience, because, as the stage directions tell us, the last king is carrying "two-fold balls and treble scepters" (4.3). These two balls (or orbs) are a symbolic representation of King James I of England (VI of Scotland), who traced his lineage back to Banquo. At James's coronation ceremony in England (1603), James held two orbs (one representing England and one representing Scotland). It looks like Shakespeare has just paid a nice little compliment to his patron.

Light and Darkness

Symbolism, Imagery, Allegory

Pretty standard stuff here. Darkness indicates something bad is about to happen; light is associated with life and God. Here's a look at some specifics:

From the first, the cover of night is invoked whenever anything terrible is going to happen. Lady Macbeth, for example, asks "thick night" to come with the "smoke of hell," so her knife won't see the wound it makes in the peacefully sleeping King (1.5.3). The literal darkness corresponds to the evil or "dark" act she plans to commit.

And then, when she calls for the murderous spirits to prevent "heaven" from "peep[ing] through the blanket of the dark to cry 'Hold, Hold!'" she implies that light (here associated with God, heaven, and goodness) offers protection from evil and is the only thing that could stop her from murdering Duncan (1.5.3). So, it's no surprise to us that, when Lady Macbeth starts going crazy, she insists on always having a candle or, "light" about her (5.1.4). We get the impression that she thinks the light is going to protect her against the evil forces she summoned... but no such luck.

Light/ Life

Macbeth responds to the news of Lady Macbeth's suicide by proclaiming "out, out brief candle" (5.5.3), turning the candle's flame has become a metaphor for her short life and sudden death. Similarly, Banquo's torchlight (the one that illuminates him just enough so his murderers can see what they're doing) is also snuffed out the moment he's killed (3.3.5). And both of these incidents recall an event from the evening King Duncan is murdered —Lennox reports that the fire in his chimney was mysteriously "blown" out (2.3.3).

Straightforward, right? The one thing we're stuck on is that this whole play is about inversion: fair being foul, and foul being fair; men being women, women being men; and the whole regicide business. Are there any moments that make this dark/ light dichotomy more complex? Or is this one area where light is just light, and dark is just dark?

Motifs

posted Aug 2, 2013, 8:42 AM by alaa hagag **[updated Aug 2, 2013, 8:42 AM]**

Hallucinations

Visions and hallucinations recur throughout the play and serve as reminders of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's joint culpability for the growing body count. When he is about to kill Duncan, Macbeth sees a dagger floating in the air. Covered with blood and pointed toward the king's chamber, the dagger represents the bloody course on which Macbeth is about to embark. Later, he sees Banquo's ghost sitting in a chair at a feast, pricking his conscience by mutely reminding him that he murdered his former friend. The seemingly hardheaded Lady Macbeth also eventually gives way to visions, as she sleepwalks and believes that her hands are stained with blood that cannot be washed away by any amount of water. In each case, it is ambiguous whether the vision is real or purely hallucinatory; but, in both cases, the Macbeths read them uniformly as supernatural signs of their guilt.

Violence

Macbeth is a famously violent play. Interestingly, most of the killings take place offstage, but throughout the play the characters provide the audience with gory descriptions of the carnage, from the opening scene where the captain describes Macbeth and Banquo wading in blood on the battlefield, to the endless references to the bloodstained hands of Macbeth and his wife. The action is bookended by a pair of bloody battles: in the first,

Macbeth defeats the invaders; in the second, he is slain and beheaded by Macduff. In between is a series of murders: Duncan, Duncan's chamberlains, Banquo, Lady Macduff, and Macduff's son all come to bloody ends. By the end of the action, blood seems to be everywhere.

Prophecy

Prophecy sets *Macbeth*'s plot in motion—namely, the witches' prophecy that Macbeth will become first thane of Cawdor and then king. The weird sisters make a number of other prophecies: they tell us that Banquo's heirs will be kings, that Macbeth should beware Macduff, that Macbeth is safe till Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane, and that no man born of woman can harm Macbeth. Save for the prophecy about Banquo's heirs, all of these predictions are fulfilled within the course of the play. Still, it is left deliberately ambiguous whether some of them are self-fulfilling—for example, whether Macbeth wills himself to be king or is fated to be king. Additionally, as the Birnam Wood and "born of woman" prophecies make clear, the prophecies must be interpreted as riddles, since they do not always mean what they seem to mean.

Reversal of Nature

One of the most common motifs in Macbeth is reversal of nature. This is prominent in role reversal between characters, unnatural weather, masculinity and femininity reversal, and unusual events.

We are first presented in Macbeth with the three witches, who show characteristics of their male counterparts such as a beard. From I.iii.45-47:

"*You should be women,*
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so."

The witches also predict various reversals of the natural order in their chants. They tell Macbeth that, although he will be king, he will not beget kings, unlike Banquo. In I.i.10-11:

"*Fair is foul, and foul is fair.*
Hover through the fog and filthy air."

The second example of "reversal of nature" is with Lady Macbeth and her masculine characteristics when compared to the norm at the time and her husband's femininity. After she reads her husband's letter, she asks for the gods to "unsex" her and therefore, remove all feminine feeling from her mind. She takes charge over Macbeth, which was unusual for the time. Macbeth meanwhile falters under her manipulation.

The weather also shows evidence of the reversal of the natural order. As Macbeth enters in I.iii.48. he exclaims:

"*So foul and fair a day I have not seen.*"

The not only connects him to the witches' previous chant, but it also foreshadows future events. Later, Lennox describes the night of Duncan's murder in II.iii.58-59:

"Some say the earth
Was feverish and did shake."

This provides imagery for the murder of Duncan.

In II.iv.12-13 a quote by the Old Man.

" *A falcon, tow'ring in her pride of place,*
Was by a mousing owl hacked at and killed. "

This is an example of the motif reversal of nature because a falcon is killed by a owl who feeds on mice.

Blood

Blood is often used to symbolize guilt, or the lack of it. For example, in II.3.59-62, Macbeth has just murdered King Duncan and feels horribly guilty for his deed. Duncan had thought rather fondly of Macbeth, and had trusted him after his previous Thane of Cawdor had betrayed him. Macbeth, with blood covering his arms and hands, exclaims

"With all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No; this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red."

This means that he feels extremely guilty, and does not believe that he will ever be able to overcome it. Not even Neptune, the god of the sea, could wash all of the blood away. In fact, it would turn the ocean red with blood.

In II.3.110, Macbeth describes Duncan as having had "golden blood," which contrasts with his own. Duncan had no guilt and had done nothing to anger Macbeth, or to make

him worthy of being murdered. In spite of this fact, Macbeth still murdered King Duncan and contaminated his blood in the process.

Another example of the blood motif occurs in Act V. Macduff has come and challenged Macbeth to a sword fight to which Macbeth refused. This happened because Macbeth didn't want to shed anymore blood (kill people) than he already has and because more bloodshed is more guilt. Macbeth is already suffering from his guilt and more guilt would just cause more problems for him.

**"*Of all men else I have avoided thee.*
But get thee back! My soul is too much charged
With blood of thine already." (V.viii.4-6)**

Manipulation

Another motif in Macbeth is manipulation. Many people throughout the play attempt to manipulate others in order to fit their own needs and desires.

A prime example of this is with Lady Macbeth. She uses her influence with her husband to convince to murder King Duncan. Previously, Macbeth had written her a letter telling her of the events that had occurred, including his new title. He had just become the Thane of Cawdor and, based on the witches' prophecy, was in line to become a king. This made him mention his thoughts of killing King Duncan, which brought out the desire for power in his wife. When he arrived at his own castle, he decides to go along with her new plan to poison and stab the King. However, he starts expressing doubt later in the night after considering the King's trust in him. At this point, Lady Macbeth continues using manipulation to try to convince him to go along with it.

One of the ways that she tries to manipulate Macbeth can be found in her line at I.vii.48-59. She is trying to reconvince her husband to go along with her plan. This was due to her lust for power that would be fulfilled if she became queen of Scotland. She exclaims:

"*What beast was't then*
That made you break this enterprise to me?
When you durst do it, then you were a man;
An to be more than what you were, you would
Be so much more than a man...
...I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to the babe that milks me:

I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this."

This means that Lady Macbeth would only see him as a man if he does it. Otherwise, she would see him as a coward. She then goes on to say that if she had promised to "dash the brains out" of a her own newborn, she would have kept the promise.

A second, and major, example of manipulation in Macbeth is with the three witches. They give the prophecy to Macbeth, knowing that he and his wife will plan to murder King Duncan in order to fulfill it. The witches prophesize this to Macbeth and his companion, Banquo, at I.iii.48-50:

"*Macbeth: Speak if you can, what are you?*
First Witch: All hail Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!
Second Witch: All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!
Third Witch: All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!"

Here they say that he is both Thane of Glamis and of Cawdor, even though he only knows of his title of "Thane of Glamis," and that he will also become the king later. This prophecy is fulfilled later, when Ross notifies him of his new title as Thane of Cawdor.

The witches yet manipulate Macbeths yet again near the end when they show him various confusing apparitions. Hecate commands tham to confuse Macbeth and give him a sense of security thta will lead to his downfall. The first apparition, an armed head, warns Macbeth of Macduff. Macbeth then decides to have Macduff's family murdered. Macduff ends up killing Macbeth as revenge, showing how the witches manipulated Macbeth into his downfall.

The second apparition, a bloody child, tells Macbeth that none born of a woman can harm him. When Macbeth finally meets Macduff, Macbeth tells him this prophecy, but Macduff tells him that he was prematurely born through surgery. Once again, the witches succeeded in manipulating Macbeth by providing him with a false sense of security.

The third apparition, a crowned child with a tree in his hand, tells him that no one will harm him until the forest of Great Birnam Wood comes against him on Dunsinane Hill. The opposing forces take branches from the forest's tress and use them to hide themselves from Macbeth's forces.

Clothing

Act One
Scene 2, line 24 – unseamed him from the nave to the chops
Scene 3, line 112 – Why do you dress me in borrowed robes?
Scene 3, line 155 – New honors hang upon him like our strange garments
Scene 7, line 35 – Golden opinions from all sorts of people that would be worn now in their newest gloss
Scene 7, line 38-39 – Was the hope drunk wherein you dressed yourself?
Act Two
Scene 2, line 45 – sleep that knits up the raveled sleeve of care
Scene 4, line 48 – lest our old robes sit easier than our new
Act Three
Scene 1, lines 18-19 – indissoluble tie forever knit (Banquo saying that he and Macbeth are knit together – irony is that Macbeth is about to kill him)
Act Five
Scene 1, line 4 – "throw her nightgown upon her"
Scene 2, line 17 – cannot buckle his distempered cause within the belt of rule
Scene 2, line 25 – like a giant's robe upon a dwarfish thief
Scene 4, lines 6-7 – let every soldier hew him down a bough
Macbeth's relationship with Banquo and with Lady Macbeth
Referring to things that are not our own
New positions
Macbeth's abilities or inabilities
Macbeth fitness to rule
Macbeth's inability to justify himself/his actions
Macbeth's character Macbeth (strength to weakness and weakness to strength)

Equivocation

Act One
Scene One, lines 12 ff. – Fair is foul and foul is fair
Scene Three, line 38 – So foul and fair a day I have not seen
Scene Three, lines 66-69 – lesser than, yet greater, etc.
Scene Three, line 138 ff. – cannot be good, cannot be ill
Scene Three, line 153 – why do you start and seem to fear things that do sound so fair?

Act Two

Scene four, line 10 – by the clock tis day, yet dark night

Act Three

Scene 2, line 60 – Things bad begun make worse themselves by ill

Act Four

Scene 2, line 30 – Fathered he is and yet he's fatherless

Act Five

Scene 1, lines 19 and 20 – her eyes are open but their sense is shut

Scene 5, lines 48-49 – to doubt the equivocation of the fiend that lies like truth

Showing that things are not what they seem to be – Macbeth, Lady Macbeth (Macbeth's character)

Macbeth's fitness to rule

Show degeneration or desperation

Blood

Act One

Scene 1, line 14 – What bloody man is that

Scene 5, lines 42-43 – Make thick my blood and stop up the access and passage to remorse

Scene 7, lines 8-10 – we but teach bloody instructions which being taught return to plague the inventor

Scene 7, line 83 – will it not be received when we have marked with blood those sleepy

Act Two

Scene 1, line 54 – on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood

Scene 2, line58-9 – go carry them and smear the sleepy grooms with blood

Scene 2, line 66 – if he do bleed, I'll guild the faces of the grooms withal because it must seem their guilt

Scene 2, line 72 – Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand?

Scene 2, lines 76-77 My hands are of your color but I shame to wear a heart so white

Scene 3, line 94 – fountain of your blood is stopped

Scene 3, line 110 – His silver skin lace with his golden blood

Scene 3, line130 – And question this most bloody piece of work to know it further

Scene 3, line 145-6 – the near in blood the nearer bloody

Act Three

Scene One, line 33 – We hear our bloody cousins are bestowed in England and in Ireland, not confessing their cruel parricide
Scene one, line 127 – bloody distance (Macbeth saying Banquo is his enemy)
Scene 4, line 14 – There's blood upon thy face/'Tis Banquo's then
Scene 4, line 110 – Thy blood is cold, thy bones are marrowless
Scene 4, line 144 – blood will have blood
Scene 4, line 159 – I am in blood, stepped in so far . . . that returning were as tedious as go o'er

Act Four

Scene 1, line 37 – baboon's blood
Scene 1, line 69 – pour in sow's blood that hath eaten her nine farrow
Scene 1, line 134 – blood boltered Banquo
Scene 3, line 36 – bleed poor country
Scene 3, line 66 – I grant him bloody, luxurious, avaricious, false, deceitful, sudden

Act Five

Scene One – Lady Macbeth's washing her hands – line 38 -- here's the smell of the blood still
Scene 8, line 7 – my soul is too much charged with blood of thine already
Scene 8, line 9 – thou bloodier villain than terms can give the out
Scene 8, line 13 – as make me bleed. I bear a charmed life that must not yield . . .
Guilt
Character – Macbeth and Lady Macbeth
Degeneration or movement into depravity (Macbeth) or into torment (Lady Macbeth)
Development of the characters – Macbeth and Lady Macbeth (strength to weakness and weakness to strength)

Nature

Act One

Scene Three, line 80 – The earth has bubbles and these are of them
Scene Four, lines 31-32 – I have begun to plant thee and will labor to see thee full of growing
Scene Four, lines 37-38 – There if I grow the harvest is your own

Act Two

Scene Three, line 40 ff. – We were lay our chimneys were blown down, etc.

Scene Four, line 10 – By the clock tis day, yet dark night … Duncan's horses

Act Three

Scene Three, line 23 – It will be rain tonight

Act Four

Scene One, lines 53 ff. – untie the winds

Scene One, lines 105 ff. – who can impress the forest, bid the tree

Scene Two, line 36 ff. – Lady Macduff and son discuss birds

Act Five

Scene One, line 7 – a great perturbation in nature to receive at one

Scene One, line 54 and 55 – unnatural deeds do breed unnatural troubles

Scene Two, line 36 – to drown the weed and dew the sovereign flower

Scene Three, line 25 and 26 – my way of life has fallen into the sere

Birnam Wood moves

Shows the progression of the play

Reflects the action on stage

Reflects death

Macbeth's character

Sleep and Sleeplessness

Act One

Scene Three, line 19 – sleep shall neither night nor day, hang upon his penthouse lid

Scene Seven, lines 39-40 – Was the hope drunk . . . wakes it now …

Scene Seven, line 65 – when Duncan is asleep . . .

Act Two

Scene One, lines 7-8 – Banquo – a heavy summons lies like lead . . . will not sleep

Scene Two, line 52 – Sleep no more

Scene Two, line 64 – the sleeping and the dead are but as pictures

Scene Three, line 66 – Shake off this downy sleep, death's counterfeit, and look on death itself

Act Three

Scene Two, line 19-25 – sleep in the affliction of these terrible dreams that shake us nightly

Scene Two, line 25 – Duncan's in his grave. After life's fitful fever he sleeps well

Scene Two, line 51 – come sealing night, and scarf up the eye of pitiful day

Scene Four, line 164 – lack the season of all natures, sleep
Scene Six, line 35 – give sleep to our nights

Act Four

None

Act Five

Scene One – Lady Macbeth sleepwalking
Scene Three, line 43 – troubled with thick-coming fancies that keep her from her rest
Guilt
Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's characters
Consequence or punishment
Plot element – play progresses, less sleep

Themes

posted Aug 2, 2013, 8:40 AM by alaa hagag **[updated Aug 2, 2013, 8:40 AM]**

Macbeth Themes

Fate

From the moment the weird sisters tell Macbeth and Banquo their prophecies, both the characters and the audience are forced to wonder about fate. Is it real? Is action necessary to make it come to pass, or will the prophecy come true no matter what one does? Different characters answer these questions in different ways at different times, and the final answers are ambiguous—as fate always is.

Unlike Banquo, Macbeth acts: he kills Duncan. Macbeth tries to master fate, to make fate conform to exactly what he wants. But, of course, fate doesn't work that way. By trying to master fate once, Macbeth puts himself in the position of having to master fate always. At every instant, he has to struggle against those parts of the witches' prophecies that don't favor him. Ultimately, Macbeth becomes so obsessed with his fate that he becomes delusional: he becomes unable to see the half-truths behind the witches' prophecies. By trying to master fate, he brings himself to ruin.

Prophecy

The plot of Macbeth is set in motion ostensibly by the prophecy of the three witches. The prophecy fans the flames of ambition within Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, serving as the primary impetus for the couple to plot the death of Duncan--and subsequently Banquo. But one also wonders: Would Macbeth have committed such heinous crimes if not for the prophecy? What if he had ignored the witches' statements? Such speculation, however interesting, ultimately appears futile, since the prophecy itself is self-fulfilling. The witches know Macbeth's tragic flaw: given the irresistible temptation to become King, he *will* choose to commit murder even though he could simply discard their words. As it turns out, the prophecies are not only fated but fatal, as Macbeth's confidence in the witches leads him to fight a rash battle in the final act.

Power

Absolute power corrupts absolutely... unless, of course, your absolute power is a god-given right. In Shakespeare's time, the Divine Right of Kings was the idea that the power of kings comes directly from God. Guess who was a big fan of the Divine Right of Kings? Our man Will's very own patron, James I. In *Macbeth*, power is natural—until it's not. When Macbeth kills Duncan, he goes against the very law of nature and God by killing his king, and then gets killed in return. According to the play, it's okay to kill King Macbeth because King Macbeth is actually a tyrant. But who gets the power to decide what tyranny looks like?

The Corrupting Power of Unchecked Ambition

The main theme of *Macbeth*—the destruction wrought when ambition goes unchecked by moral constraints—finds its most powerful expression in the play's two main characters. Macbeth is a courageous Scottish general who is not naturally inclined to commit evil deeds, yet he deeply desires power and advancement. He kills Duncan against his better judgment

and afterward stews in guilt and paranoia. Toward the end of the play he descends into a kind of frantic, boastful madness. Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, pursues her goals with greater determination, yet she is less capable of withstanding the repercussions of her immoral acts. One of Shakespeare's most forcefully drawn female characters, she spurs her husband mercilessly to kill Duncan and urges him to be strong in the murder's aftermath, but she is eventually driven to distraction by the effect of Macbeth's repeated bloodshed on her conscience. In each case, ambition—helped, of course, by the malign prophecies of the witches—is what drives the couple to ever more terrible atrocities. The problem, the play suggests, is that once one decides to use violence to further one's quest for power, it is difficult to stop. There are always potential threats to the throne—Banquo, Fleance, Macduff—and it is always tempting to use violent means to dispose of them.

Violence

To call Macbeth a violent play is an understatement. It begins in battle, contains the murder of men, women, and children, and ends not just with a climactic siege but the suicide of Lady Macbeth and the beheading of its main character, Macbeth. In the process of all this bloodshed, Macbeth makes an important point about the nature of violence: every violent act, even those done for selfless reasons, seems to lead inevitably to the next. The violence through which Macbeth takes the throne, as Macbeth himself realizes, opens the way for others to try to take the throne for themselves through violence. So Macbeth must commit more violence, and more violence, until violence is all he has left. As Macbeth himself says after seeing Banquo's ghost, "blood will to blood." Violence leads to violence, a vicious cycle.

Manhood

Over and over again in Macbeth, characters discuss or debate about manhood: Lady Macbeth challenges Macbeth when he decides not to kill Duncan, Banquo refuses to join Macbeth in his plot, Lady Macduff questions Macduff's decision to go to England, and on and on.

Through these challenges, Macbeth questions and examines manhood itself. Does a true man take what he wants no matter what it is, as Lady Macbeth believes? Or does a real man have the strength to restrain his desires, as Banquo believes? All of Macbeth can be seen as a struggle to answer this question about the nature and responsibilities of manhood.

The Relationship Between Cruelty and Masculinity

Characters in *Macbeth* frequently dwell on issues of gender. Lady Macbeth manipulates her husband by questioning his manhood, wishes that she herself could be "unsexed," and does not contradict Macbeth when he says that a woman like her should give birth only to boys. In the same manner that Lady Macbeth goads her husband on to murder, Macbeth provokes the murderers he hires to kill Banquo by questioning their manhood. Such acts show that both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth equate masculinity with naked aggression, and whenever they converse about manhood, violence soon follows. Their understanding of manhood allows the political order depicted in the play to descend into chaos.

At the same time, however, the audience cannot help noticing that women are also sources of violence and evil. The witches' prophecies spark Macbeth's ambitions and then encourage his violent behavior; Lady Macbeth provides the brains and the will behind her husband's plotting; and the only divine being to appear is Hecate, the *goddess* of witchcraft. Arguably, *Macbeth* traces the root of chaos and evil to women, which has led some critics to argue that this is Shakespeare's most misogynistic play. While the male characters are just as violent and prone to evil as the women, the aggression of the female characters is more striking because it goes against prevailing expectations of how women ought to behave. Lady Macbeth's behavior certainly shows that women can be as ambitious and cruel as men. Whether because of the constraints of her society or because she is not fearless enough to kill, Lady Macbeth relies on deception and manipulation rather than violence to achieve her ends.

Ultimately, the play does put forth a revised and less destructive definition of manhood. In the scene where Macduff learns of the murders of his wife and child, Malcolm consoles him by encouraging him to take the news in "manly" fashion, by seeking revenge upon Macbeth. Macduff shows the young heir apparent that he has a mistaken understanding of masculinity. To Malcolm's suggestion, "Dispute it like a man," Macduff replies, "I shall do so. But I must also feel it as a man" (4.3.221–223). At the end of the play, Siward receives news of his son's death rather complacently. Malcolm responds: "He's worth more sorrow [than you have expressed] / And that I'll spend for him" (5.11.16–17). Malcolm's comment shows that he has learned the lesson Macduff gave him on the sentient nature of true masculinity. It also suggests that, with Malcolm's coronation, order will be restored to the Kingdom of Scotland.

Gender

Ah, 11th century Scotland: a time when men were men, and women were … either bearded witches, unsexed nags, or dead. (Yeah, did you notice that not a single woman is left alive at

the end of the play?) Shakespeare may be known for strong female heroines, but they're not hanging around this play. Not that *Macbeth* is full of strong male heroes, either. We get a lot of examples of how *not* to do it, and in the end we're left with Macduff and Malcolm as our role models. So, which one are you going to look up to: the man who left his family to the not-so-tender mercies of Macbeth's murderous crew; or the new king, whose first impulse was to run away?

The Difference Between Kingship and Tyranny

In the play, Duncan is always referred to as a "king," while Macbeth soon becomes known as the "tyrant." The difference between the two types of rulers seems to be expressed in a conversation that occurs in Act 4, scene 3, when Macduff meets Malcolm in England. In order to test Macduff's loyalty to Scotland, Malcolm pretends that he would make an even worse king than Macbeth. He tells Macduff of his reproachable qualities—among them a thirst for personal power and a violent temperament, both of which seem to characterize Macbeth perfectly. On the other hand, Malcolm says, "The king-becoming graces / [are] justice, verity, temp'rance, stableness, / Bounty, perseverance, mercy, [and] lowliness" (4.3.92–93). The model king, then, offers the kingdom an embodiment of order and justice, but also comfort and affection. Under him, subjects are rewarded according to their merits, as when Duncan makes Macbeth thane of Cawdor after Macbeth's victory over the invaders. Most important, the king must be loyal to Scotland above his own interests. Macbeth, by contrast, brings only chaos to Scotland—symbolized in the bad weather and bizarre supernatural events—and offers no real justice, only a habit of capriciously murdering those he sees as a threat. As the embodiment of tyranny, he must be overcome by Malcolm so that Scotland can have a true king once more.

Guilt and Remorse

Some of the most famous and poetic lines from Macbeth are expressions of remorse. "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?" exclaims Macbeth after he stabs Duncan (II ii 58-59). Similarly, Lady Macbeth is plagued by a "spot" that she cannot remove from her hand: "Out, damned spot! Out, I say. . . What, will these hands ne'er be clean?" (V I 30-37). At first physical remainders of a regrettable crime, the royal blood leaves permanent marks on the psyche of the couple, forever staining them with guilt and remorse. The different ways in which the Macbeths cope with their crimes show how their characters develop: whereas Lady Macbeth is initially the one without scruples, urging Macbeth to take action, it is an overpowering sense of guilt and remorse that drives the Lady to her untimely death. Macbeth, on the other hand, seems to overcome the guilt that plagues him early on in the play.

The Supernatural

Are the three weird sisters witches, or are they just ... three weird sisters? Is there really a floating dagger, or is Macbeth just making up excuses? Does he really see a ghost, or is it just the impression of his guilty conscience? Do you believe in magic? In *Macbeth*, the supernatural isn't just for stories around the fireplace; it's a real, everyday fact of life. Almost, you might say, *natural*.

Unless, of course, it isn't. To figure out what's going on with all the witches and ghosts, you have to decide whether you believe in fate. Is Macbeth seeing daggers and ghosts because someone outside his control is controlling him? Or is he simply seeing the fevered imaginings of a guilty and freely choosing mind?

Ambition and Temptation

Ambition and temptation both play a key factor in Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's decision to kill Duncan. Macbeth possesses enough self-awareness to realize the dangers of overzealous ambition: "I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself / And falls on th'other" (25-28). And yet, the temptation to carry out the witches' prophecy is ultimately too strong for Macbeth to curb his ambition. In Lady Macbeth's lexicon, incidentally, "hope" is also another word for "ambition" and perhaps "temptation." As Macbeth expresses his doubts about killing Duncan, she demands: "Was the hope drunk / Wherein you dressed yourself" (35-36)? Ironically, Lady Macbeth must herself rely on intoxicants to "make [her] bold" before executing her ambitious and murderous plans (II ii 1). Once the intoxication wears off, Lady Macbeth finds that she is unable to cope with the consequences of her own "hope." Ultimately, ambition and temptation prove fatal for both the Macbeths.

Salvation and Damnation

As a morality tale of sorts, Macbeth has as its near contemporary Christopher Marlowe's Dr. Faustus. Like Dr. Faustus, Macbeth recognizes the damning consequences of his crime:

. . . Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued against
The deep damnation of his taking-off." (I vii 16-20)

And yet Macbeth carries out the crime, thus precipitating his own descent into hell. Later in the play, appropriately, Macduff calls Macbeth by the name of "hell-hound" (V x 3). Indeed, the story of Macbeth is that of a man who acquiesces in his damnation—in part because he cannot utter words that may attenuate his crime. As Duncan's guards pray "God bless us" on their

deathbed, Macbeth cannot say one “Amen” (II ii 26-27). His fate is thus sealed entirely by his own hands.

Time

Macbeth's most famous speech begins "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow," so, yes: we're going to say that time matters. (And, to be honest, this theme takes the Tough-o-Meter up a notch or two, but we think you can handle it.) Basically, the idea is that time literally comes to a halt when Macbeth murders King Duncan and takes the throne. All of the events that take place between the murder and the final battle seem to happen out of time, almost in some sort of alternate reality, in some witch-land outside of history. Macduff's final remark that the "time is free" now that Macbeth is defeated and Malcolm is set to take his rightful position as hereditary monarch clues us in to the relationship between the seeming disruption in linear time and the disruption of lineal succession: without its rightful ruler, a country has no future.

Dichotomy and Equivocation

“Fair is foul, and foul is fair / Hover through the fog and filthy air” (I i 10-11). The first scene of the first act ends with these words of the witches, which Macbeth echoes in his first line: “So foul and fair a day I have not seen” (I iii 36). In a similar fashion, many scenes conclude with lines of dichotomy or equivocation: “Hear it not, Duncan; for it is a knell / That summons thee to heaven or hell” (II i64); “God’s benison go with you, and with those/ That would make good of bad, and friends of foes” (II iv 41-42). Such lines evoke an air of deep uncertainty: while polarities are reversed and established values are overturned, it is entirely unclear as to whether the dichotomous clarity of “heaven or hell” trumps the equivocatory fogginess of “fair is foul, and foul is fair.” Thus, for Macbeth, this translates into an uncertainty as to whether the prophecies are believable. It seems that Birnam Wood will either come to Dunsinane Hill (a supernatural event) or it will not (a natural event); but the actual even turns out to be neither here nor there, as the Wood *figuratively* comes to Dunsinane.

Ghosts and Visions

Just as an overwhelming guilty conscience drives Lady Macbeth mad, so too does Macbeth’s “heat-oppressed” brain project the vision of a dagger before he murders Duncan (II i 39). In what concerns ghosts and visions, the relation of the natural to the supernatural in Macbeth is unclear. The three apparitions that the witches summon, for example, are usually taken to be “real”—even if only as supernatural occurrences. But the matter is less clear when it comes to Banquo’ ghost. Macbeth is the only one who sees the ghost in a crowded room; is this yet another projection of his feverish mind? Or is it really, so to speak, a supernatural occurrence?

Such ambiguities contribute to the eerie mood and sense of uncanniness that pervade the play, from the very opening scene with the three bearded witches.

Summary

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Macbeth Summary

Act 1

The play takes place in Scotland. Duncan, the king of Scotland, is at war with the king of Norway. As the play opens, he learns of Macbeth's bravery in a victorious battle against Macdonald—a Scot who sided with the Norwegians. At the same time, news arrives concerning the arrest of the treacherous Thane of Cawdor. Duncan decides to give the title of Thane of Cawdor to Macbeth.

As Macbeth and Banquo return home from battle, they meet three witches. The witches predict that Macbeth will be thane of Cawdor and king of Scotland, and that Banquo will be the father of kings. After the witches disappear, Macbeth and Banquo meet two noblemen Ross and Angus, who announce Macbeth's new title as thane of Cawdor. Upon hearing this, Macbeth begins to contemplate the murder of Duncan in order to realize the witches' second prophecy.

Macbeth and Banquo meet with Duncan, who announces that he is going to pay Macbeth a visit at his castle. Macbeth rides ahead to prepare his household. Meanwhile, Lady Macbeth receives a letter from Macbeth informing her of the witches' prophesy and its subsequent realization. A servant appears to inform her of Duncan's approach. Energized by the news, Lady Macbeth invokes supernatural powers to strip her of feminine softness and thus prepare her for the murder of Duncan. When Macbeth arrives, Lady Macbeth tells him that she will plot Duncan's murder.

When Duncan arrives at the castle, Lady Macbeth greets him alone. When Macbeth fails to appear, Lady Macbeth finds him is in his room, contemplating the weighty and evil decision to kill Duncan. Lady Macbeth taunts him by telling him that he will only be a man if he kills Duncan. She then tells him her plan for the murder, which Macbeth accepts: they will kill him while his drunken bodyguards sleep, then plant incriminating evidence on the bodyguards.

Act 2

Macbeth sees a vision of a bloody dagger floating before him, leading him to Duncan's room.

When he hears Lady Macbeth ring the bell to signal the completion of her preparations, Macbeth sets out to complete his part in the murderous plan.

Lady Macbeth waits for Macbeth to finish the act of regicide. Macbeth enters, still carrying the bloody daggers. Lady Macbeth again chastises him for his weak-mindedness and plants the daggers on the bodyguards herself. While she does so, Macbeth imagines that he hears a haunting voice saying that he shall sleep no more. Lady Macbeth returns and assures Macbeth that "a little water clears us of this deed" (II ii 65).

As the thanes Macduff and Lennox arrive, the porter pretends that he is guarding the gate to hell. Immediately thereafter, Macduff discovers Duncan's dead body. Macbeth kills the two bodyguards, claiming that he was overcome with a fit of grief and rage when he saw them with the bloody daggers. Duncan's sons Malcolm and Donalbain, fearing their lives to be in danger, flee to England and Ireland. Their flight brings them under suspicion of conspiring against Duncan. Macbeth is thus crowned king of Scotland.

Act 3

In an attempt to thwart the witches' prophesy that Banquo will father kings, Macbeth hires two murderers to kill Banquo and his son Fleance. Lady Macbeth is left uninformed of these plans. A third murderer joins the other two on the heath and the three men kill Banquo. Fleance, however, manages to escape.

Banquo's ghost appears to Macbeth as he sits down to a celebratory banquet, sending him into a frenzy of terror. Lady Macbeth attempts to cover up for his odd behavior but the banquet comes to a premature end as the thanes begin to question Macbeth's sanity. Macbeth decides that he must revisit the witches to look into the future once more.

Meanwhile, Macbeth's thanes begin to turn against him. Macduff meets Malcolm in England to prepare an army to march on Scotland.

Act 4

The witches show Macbeth three apparitions. The first warns him against Macduff, the second tells him to fear no man born of woman, and the third prophesizes that he will fall only when Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane castle. Macbeth takes this as a prophecy that he is infallible. When he asks the witches if their prophesy about Banquo will come true, they show him a procession of eight kings, all of whom look like Banquo.

Meanwhile in England, Malcolm tests Macduff's loyalty by pretending to confess to multiple sins and malicious ambitions. When Macduff proves his loyalty to Scotland, the two strategize for their offensive against Macbeth. Back in Scotland, Macbeth has Macduff's wife and children murdered.

Act 5

Lady Macbeth suffers from bouts of sleepwalking. To a doctor who observes her symptoms, she unwittingly reveals her guilt as she pronounces that she cannot wash her hands clean of bloodstains. Macbeth is too preoccupied with battle preparations to pay much heed to her dreams and expresses anger when the doctor says he cannot cure her. Just as the English army led by Malcolm, Macduff, Siward approaches, Lady Macbeth's cry of death is heard in the castle. When Macbeth hears of her death, he comments that she should have died at a future date and muses on the meaninglessness of life.

Taking the witches' second prophecies in good faith, Macbeth still believes that he is impregnable to the approaching army. But Malcolm has instructed each man in the English army to cut a tree branch from Birnam Wood and hold it up to disguise the army's total numbers. As a result, Macbeth's servant reports that he has seen a seemingly impossible sight: Birnam Wood seems to be moving toward the castle. Macbeth is shaken but still engages the oncoming army.

In battle, Macbeth kills Young Siward, the English general's brave son. Macduff then challenges Macbeth. As they fight, Macduff reveals that he was not "of woman born" but was "untimely ripped" from his mother's womb (V x 13-16). Macbeth is stunned but refuses to yield to Macduff. Macduff kills him and decapitates him. At the end of the play, Malcolm is proclaimed the new king of Scotland.

Characters

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Macbeth Characters

Macbeth

Because we first hear of Macbeth in the wounded captain's account of his battlefield valor, our initial impression is of a brave and capable warrior. This perspective is complicated, however, once we see Macbeth interact with the three witches. We realize that his physical courage is joined by a consuming ambition and a tendency to self-doubt—the prediction that he will be king brings him joy, but it also creates inner turmoil. These three attributes—bravery, ambition, and self-doubt—struggle

for mastery of Macbeth throughout the play. Shakespeare uses Macbeth to show the terrible effects that ambition and guilt can have on a man who lacks strength of character. We may classify Macbeth as irrevocably evil, but his weak character separates him from Shakespeare's great villains—Iago in *Othello,* Richard III in *Richard III,* Edmund in *King Lear*—who are all strong enough to conquer guilt and self-doubt. Macbeth, great warrior though he is, is ill equipped for the psychic consequences of crime.

Before he kills Duncan, Macbeth is plagued by worry and almost aborts the crime. It takes Lady Macbeth's steely sense of purpose to push him into the deed. After the murder, however, her powerful personality begins to disintegrate, leaving Macbeth increasingly alone. He fluctuates between fits of fevered action, in which he plots a series of murders to secure his throne, and moments of terrible guilt (as when Banquo's ghost appears) and absolute pessimism (after his wife's death, when he seems to succumb to despair). These fluctuations reflect the tragic tension within Macbeth: he is at once too ambitious to allow his conscience to stop him from murdering his way to the top and too conscientious to be happy with himself as a murderer. As things fall apart for him at the end of the play, he seems almost relieved—with the English army at his gates, he can finally return to life as a warrior, and he displays a kind of reckless bravado as his enemies surround him and drag him down. In part, this stems from his fatal confidence in the witches' prophecies, but it also seems to derive from the fact that he has returned to the arena where he has been most successful and where his internal turmoil need not affect him—namely, the battlefield. Unlike many of Shakespeare's other tragic heroes, Macbeth never seems to contemplate suicide: "Why should I play the Roman fool," he asks, "and die / On mine own sword?" (5.10.1–2). Instead, he goes down fighting, bringing the play full circle: it begins with Macbeth winning on the battlefield and ends with him dying in combat.

Lady Macbeth

Lady Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's most famous and frightening female characters. When we first see her, she is already plotting Duncan's murder, and she is stronger, more ruthless, and more ambitious than her husband. She seems fully aware of this and knows that she will have to push Macbeth into committing murder. At one point, she wishes that she were not a woman so that she could do it herself. This theme of the relationship between gender and power is key to Lady Macbeth's character: her husband implies that she is a masculine soul inhabiting a female body, which seems to link masculinity to ambition and violence. Shakespeare, however, seems to use her, and the witches, to undercut Macbeth's idea that "undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males" (1.7.73–74). These crafty women use *female* methods of achieving power—that is, manipulation—to further their supposedly male ambitions. Women, the play implies, can be as ambitious and cruel as men, yet social constraints deny them the means to pursue these ambitions on their own.

Lady Macbeth manipulates her husband with remarkable effectiveness, overriding all his

objections; when he hesitates to murder, she repeatedly questions his manhood until he feels that he must commit murder to prove himself. Lady Macbeth's remarkable strength of will persists through the murder of the king—it is she who steadies her husband's nerves immediately after the crime has been perpetrated. Afterward, however, she begins a slow slide into madness—just as ambition affects her more strongly than Macbeth before the crime, so does guilt plague her more strongly afterward. By the close of the play, she has been reduced to sleepwalking through the castle, desperately trying to wash away an invisible bloodstain. Once the sense of guilt comes home to roost, Lady Macbeth's sensitivity becomes a weakness, and she is unable to cope. Significantly, she (apparently) kills herself, signaling her total inability to deal with the legacy of their crimes.

The Three Witches

Throughout the play, the witches—referred to as the "weird sisters" by many of the characters—lurk like dark thoughts and unconscious temptations to evil. In part, the mischief they cause stems from their supernatural powers, but mainly it is the result of their understanding of the weaknesses of their specific interlocutors—they play upon Macbeth's ambition like puppeteers.

The witches' beards, bizarre potions, and rhymed speech make them seem slightly ridiculous, like caricatures of the supernatural. Shakespeare has them speak in rhyming couplets throughout (their most famous line is probably "Double, double, toil and trouble, / Fire burn and cauldron bubble" in 4.1.10–11), which separates them from the other characters, who mostly speak in blank verse. The witches' words seem almost comical, like malevolent nursery rhymes. Despite the absurdity of their "eye of newt and toe of frog" recipes, however, they are clearly the most dangerous characters in the play, being both tremendously powerful and utterly wicked (4.1.14).

The audience is left to ask whether the witches are independent agents toying with human lives, or agents of fate, whose prophecies are only reports of the inevitable. The witches bear a striking and obviously intentional resemblance to the Fates, female characters in both Norse and Greek mythology who weave the fabric of human lives and then cut the threads to end them. Some of their prophecies seem self-fulfilling. For example, it is doubtful that Macbeth would have murdered his king without the push given by the witches' predictions. In other cases, though, their prophecies are just remarkably accurate readings of the future—it is hard to see Birnam Wood coming to Dunsinane as being self-fulfilling in any way. The play offers no

easy answers. Instead, Shakespeare keeps the witches well outside the limits of human comprehension. They embody an unreasoning, instinctive evil.

Duncan, King of Scotland

A kindly and trusting older man, Duncan's unsuspecting nature leaves him open to Macbeth's betrayal. Both before and after the regicide, it is Duncan's particularly virtuous nature that enhances Macbeth's sense of guilt. The historic Duncan, incidentally, was a young man when he was betrayed by his general Macbeth

Banquo – A Scottish nobleman, general, and friend of Macbeth. He is also the father of Fleance. The weird sisters prophesies that while Banquo will never be King of Scotland, his descendants will one day sit on the throne. Banquo is as ambitious as Macbeth, but unlike Macbeth he resists putting his selfish ambition above his honor or the good of Scotland. Because he both knows the prophecy and is honorable, Banquo is both a threat to Macbeth and a living example of the noble path that Macbeth chose not to take. After Macbeth has Banquo murdered he is haunted by Banquo's ghost, which symbolizes Macbeth's terrible guilt at what he has become.

Malcolm and Donalbain, Duncan's sons

Although Malcolm and Donalbain seem to have inherited Duncan's fairness, both display a cunning that far surpasses their father. After Duncan's death, they fear for their lives rightly and both flee Scotland. Malcolm also tests Macduff's loyalty whilst abroad by putting on dishonorable and corrupt airs. Such cunning, or shrewdness, allows for their successful return to the crown of Scotland.

Donalbain

King Duncan's younger son and Malcolm's brother.

Banquo

The brave, noble general whose children, according to the witches' prophecy, will inherit the Scottish throne. Like Macbeth, Banquo thinks ambitious thoughts, but he does not translate those thoughts into action. In a sense, Banquo's character stands as a rebuke to Macbeth, since he represents the path Macbeth chose not to take: a path in which ambition need not lead to betrayal and murder. Appropriately, then, it is Banquo's ghost—and not Duncan's—that haunts Macbeth. In addition to embodying Macbeth's guilt for killing Banquo, the ghost also reminds Macbeth that he did not emulate Banquo's reaction to the witches' prophecy.

Macduff

A Scottish nobleman, and the Thane of Fife. His wife is Lady Macduff, and the two have babies and a young son. Macduff offers a contrast to Macbeth: a Scottish lord who, far from being ambitious, puts the welfare of Scotland even ahead of the welfare of his own family. Macduff suspects Macbeth from the beginning, and becomes one of the leaders of the rebellion. After Macbeth has Macduff's family murdered, Macduff's desire for vengeance becomes more personal and powerful.

Lady Macduff

Macduff's wife. The scene in her castle provides our only glimpse of a domestic realm other than that of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. She and her home serve as contrasts to Lady Macbeth and the hellish world of Inverness.

Weird Sisters

Three witches, whose prophecy helps push Macbeth's ambition over the edge, and convinces him to murder Duncan in order to become King. The witches' knowledge of future events clearly indicates that they have supernatural powers, and they also clearly enjoy using those powers to cause havoc and mayhem among mankind. But it is important to realize that the witches never compel anyone to do anything. Instead, they tell half-truths to lure men into giving into their own dark desires. It's left vague in Macbeth whether Macbeth would have become King of Scotland if he just sat back and did nothing. This vagueness seems to suggest that while the broad outlines of a person's fate might be predetermined, how the fate plays out is up to him.

Hecate

The goddess of witchcraft, who helps the three witches work their mischief on Macbeth.

Fleance

Banquo's teenage son. Macbeth sees him as a threat because of the weird sisters' prophecy that Banquo's descendants will one day rule Scotland.

Lennox

A Scottish noble who gradually questions Macbeth's tyrannical rule.

Ross

A Scottish nobleman.

The Murderers

A group of ruffians conscripted by Macbeth to murder Banquo, Fleance (whom they fail to kill), and

Macduff's wife and children

Angus, Menteith, and Caithness

Scottish nobles who join with Malcolm and the English forces in opposing Macbeth.

Siward, Earl of Northumberland

As Duncan's brother, he leads the English army against Macbeth. His army disguises itself with branches from Birnam Wood, thereby fulfilling the witches' prophesy that Macbeth will fall only when "Birnam Wood remove to Dunsinane." Siward is also a proud father, declaring his approval when his son dies bravely in battle.

Young Siward

Siward's son, slain by Macbeth in combat.

Porter

The guardian of the gate at Macbeth's castle.

Gentlewoman

Lady Macbeth's attendant.

King Edward

The King of England. He is so saintly his touch can cure the sick.

Captain

A captain in the Scottish Army.

Seyton

Macbeth's servant.

Old Man

An elderly fellow who sees some strange things happen the night Macbeth murders Duncan.

English Doctor

An English doctor.

Scottish Doctor

The doctor Macbeth assigns to cure Lady Macbeth of her madness.

Three Messengers, Three Servants, a Lord, a Soldier, a Captain in Duncan's army, an Old Man, an English Doctor, a Scottish Doctor, A Scottish Gentlewoman

Incidental characters.

Critical Evaluation

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Macbeth Critical Evaluation

Macbeth not only is the shortest of William Shakespeare's great tragedies but also is anomalous in some structural respects. Like Othello, the Moor of Venice (pr. 1604, pb. 1622) and only a very few other Shakespearean plays, Macbeth is without the complications of a subplot. Consequently, the action moves forward in a swift and inexorable rush. More significantly, the climax — the murder of Duncan — takes place very early in the play. As a result, attention is focused on the various consequences of the crime rather than on the ambiguities or moral dilemmas that had preceded and occasioned it.

In this, the play differs from Othello, where the hero commits murder only after long plotting, and from Hamlet, Prince of Denmark (pr. c. 1600-1601, pb. 1603), where the hero spends most of the play in moral indecision. Macbeth is more like King Lear (pr. c. 1605-1606, pb. 1608), where destructive action flows from the central premise of the division of the kingdom. However, Macbeth differs from that play, too, in that it does not raise the monumental, cosmic questions of good and evil in nature. Instead, it explores the moral and psychological effects of evil in the life of one man. For all the power and prominence of Lady Macbeth, the drama remains essentially the story of the lord who commits regicide and thereby enmeshes himself in a complex web of consequences.

When Macbeth first enters, he is far from the villain whose experiences the play subsequently describes. He has just returned from a glorious military success in defense of the Crown. He is rewarded by the grateful Duncan, with preferment as thane of Cawdor. This honor, which initially qualifies him for the role of hero,

ironically intensifies the horror of the murder Macbeth soon commits.

Macbeth's fall is rapid, and his crime is more clearly a sin than is usually the case in tragedy. It is not mitigated by mixed motives or insufficient knowledge. Moreover, the sin is regicide, an action viewed during the Renaissance as exceptionally foul, since it struck at God's representative on Earth. The sin is so boldly offensive that many have tried to find extenuation in the impetus given Macbeth by the witches. However, the witches do not control behavior in the play. They are symbolic of evil and prescient of crimes that are to come, but they neither encourage nor facilitate Macbeth's actions. They are merely a poignant external symbol of the ambition that is already within Macbeth. Indeed, when he discusses the witches' prophecy with Lady Macbeth, it is clear that the possibility has been discussed before.

The responsibility cannot be shifted to Lady Macbeth, despite her goading. In a way, she is merely acting out the role of the good wife, encouraging her husband to do what she believes to be in his best interests. She is a catalyst and supporter, but she does not make the grim decision, and Macbeth never tries to lay the blame on her.

When Macbeth proceeds on his bloody course, there is little extenuation in his brief failure of nerve. He is an ambitious man overpowered by his high aspirations, yet Shakespeare is able to elicit feelings of sympathy for him from the audience. Despite the evil of his actions, he does not arouse the distaste audiences reserve for such villains as Iago and Cornwall. This may be because Macbeth is not evil incarnate but a human being who has sinned. Moreover, audiences are as much affected by what Macbeth says about his actions as by the deeds themselves. Both substance and setting emphasize the great evil, but Macbeth does not go about his foul business easily. He knows what he is doing, and his agonizing reflections show a person increasingly losing control over his own moral destiny.

Although Lady Macbeth demonstrated greater courage and resolution at the time of the murder of Duncan, it is she who falls victim to the physical manifestations of remorse and literally dies of guilt. Macbeth, who starts more tentatively, becomes stronger, or perhaps more inured, as he faces the consequences of his initial crime. The play examines the effects of evil on Macbeth's character and on his subsequent moral behavior. The later murders flow naturally out of the first. Evil breeds evil because Macbeth, to protect himself and consolidate his position, is forced to murder again. Successively, he kills Banquo, attempts to murder Fleance, and brutally exterminates Macduff's family. As his crimes increase, Macbeth's freedom seems to decrease, but his moral responsibility does not. His actions become more coldblooded

as his options disappear.

Shakespeare does not allow Macbeth any moral excuses. The dramatist is aware of the notion that any action performed makes it more likely that the person will perform other such actions. The operation of this phenomenon is apparent as Macbeth finds it increasingly easier to rise to the gruesome occasion. However, the dominant inclination never becomes a total determinant of behavior, so Macbeth does not have the excuse of loss of free will. It does, however, become ever more difficult to break the chain of events that are rushing him toward moral and physical destruction.

As Macbeth degenerates, he becomes more deluded about his invulnerability and more emboldened. What he gains in will and confidence is counterbalanced and eventually toppled by the iniquitous weight of the events he set in motion and felt he had to perpetuate. When he dies, he seems almost to be released from the imprisonment of his own evil.

Essay by: “Critical Evaluation” by Edward E. Foster