

Richmond Shakespeare

Play Guide

MACBETH

By William Shakespeare

Prepared by
Encore! Educational Outreach

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Pre-performance

Interesting Stuff

Sources and history for *Macbeth*

Background

The earliest recorded performance of *Macbeth* was on August 20, 1611, at the Globe Theatre. However, there is much speculation that it was written, and therefore probably performed, much earlier, for James I in August, 1606. Henry Paul, who wrote a long treatise in 1950 on *Macbeth* as being a conscious flattery of the king, speculates that there was a performance for the king in the company of his brother-in-law, King Christian IV of Denmark on August.

There is no absolute corroboration of this exact date; we only know that the King's Men had a performance that day from the court records. However there is a great deal of logic in the assumption that *Macbeth* would be the play.

Style and topical references place the play in this time frame; it appears to have been written between 1605 and 1607. Although many of Shakespeare's plays had themes and ideas that might have been pleasing to the previous monarch, Queen Elizabeth, this is the first and perhaps only play that seems to be written specifically to please and reassure the current monarch, James I, also known as James VI of Scotland.

England, which had lost its "Virgin Queen" in 1603, had experienced "monarchy angst" almost continually since the start of the War of the Roses in 1455. At that time, allegiance to the wrong family, Lancaster or York, could be fatal. After the Tudors ascended the throne, Henry VIII made it dangerous to practice Catholicism. His daughter, nicknamed Bloody Mary, reversed the edict and killed and/or tortured many Protestants. After Mary, Elizabeth practiced Protestantism but favored neutrality toward others. Unfortunately, she was forced to renew executions of Catholics after a number of assassination attempts from that quarter. Uneasiness over Elizabeth's successor was only natural. However, once again "Gloriana" had provided for her people: she had arranged that her cousin, James VI of Scotland (and son of her executed cousin, Mary Queen of Scots), should become king of England after her death.

However, James did not rest easy on the throne. His father had been assassinated; his mother was executed. To add to that he believed firmly in the supernatural, particularly witches, and that they were constantly working against him, God's anointed representative on earth. Fascinated by

witchy antics, he personally attended the trial of a group of witches accused of brewing the storm that had interfered with the nuptial voyage of his bride to be, Anne of Denmark and thus delayed the wedding. He himself had written a treatise on witches called *Daemonologie* in 1597 and had an act passed in 1604 that no one should "consult, covenant with, entertain, employ, feed or reward any evil and wicked Spirit..." He also decreed that no one was allowed to "take bodies or body parts out of graves or practice witchcraft' that involved people being killed or injured.

His uneasiness was heightened by a failed assassination attempt on November 5, 1605. The night before the new session of Parliament, which would be opened by the appearance of the King, police apprehended Guy Fawkes in the cellar filled with gunpowder and iron bars under Parliament Hall. Fawkes had a watch, a fuse and tinder. The purported plan was that Catholics wanted to blow up James and the Parliament because James had reneged on a promise to increase tolerance toward Catholics. Conversely, many Catholics believed that Robert Cecil, chief minister to the King, had created the plot himself to make Catholics look bad.

Among those arrested afterward was Father Henry Garnet, head of a secret Jesuit (Catholic) mission in England. He pleaded innocent but had published a *Treatise of Equivocation*, which defended giving misleading information when one was questioned under oath. (References to and examples of equivocation are scattered throughout *Macbeth*; the most famous being the Porter's reference to equivocators after the murder scene. These add weight to the theory that *Macbeth* was written very soon after the Gunpowder Plot.) Garnet was beheaded.

Even subsequent beheadings and torture were not the end of the matter. James had a nervous disposition to begin with and now he was in a terror. And when the King was in a terror, EVERYONE was in a terror. Everything was in turmoil: foreigners feared the English, Catholics feared Protestants and Catholic radicals, Protestants feared Catholics. In March, 1606, a report went out that the King had been assassinated variously by Jesuits, Scots in women's clothing, Spaniards and Frenchmen. Everything was in lockdown until the King issued a proclamation that he was alive.

Both England and James needed reassurance. Shakespeare's players, formerly the Lord Admiral's Men had become The King's Men. Who better to provide that assurance?

Macbeth is Shakespeare's only play dealing primarily with Scotland. His chief source was Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*. Holinshed's source was most likely the work of Hector Boece: *Scotorum Historiae*. Boece was indebted to a 14th century priest, John of Fardun and to a 15th century writer, Andrew of Wyntoun. By the time the time Holinshed got to the story of Macbeth, it was mostly fiction, and Shakespeare took it a step further.

What is the true story (as much as we know if it)? In 1034, Malcolm II was murdered by fellow warlords, possibly including his grandson, Duncan. Then Duncan killed his rivals and seized the throne for himself. Macbeth did kill Duncan in 1040 but was allied with others in a clan battle for the kingship. Duncan had two sons: Malcolm and Donald Bane.

Macbeth was reported to have been a good king, strict but fair. He was defeated by the Earl of Northumbria (the British Siward in the play) who had also helped Malcolm to England after Duncan's death, at Birnam Wood. However, the Earl had to retire because of heavy losses, and Macbeth ruled for three more years before being killed by Malcolm, Duncan's son. Banquo and Fleance were probably invented by Boece and in Holinshed's account, Banquo helps Macbeth plan the murder of Duncan.

The story of King Duff from the *Chronicles* is also mixed into the play. King Duff was murdered by Donwald, who was urged on by his wife, in Donwald's castle.

Shakespeare made many changes in the already semi-historic story from the *Chronicles*. The most important change was to the character of Banquo. James I claimed to be a direct descendant of Banquo and it would be favorable for Shakespeare, as he did in other plays, to portray the ancestors of the current ruler in a favorable light. In Shakespeare's version, Banquo, instead of aiding in the murder of Duncan, becomes the object of Macbeth's suspicion and a victim himself. However, Fleance, his son, lives on and presumably sires a line of kings that culminates in James I. Stephen Greenblatt, author of *Will n the World*, postulates that in that possible performance for the King in 1605, when Macbeth questions the witches as to whether Banquo's descendants would rule, that a "glass" (a mirror) would have been held in front of the king after all the others characters had been shown, to indicate that he was the end product of Banquo's line.

There is also evidence of numerous cuts in the play; it is the shortest of Shakespeare's tragedies. James I had a notoriously short attention span.

Theme or **What's the main idea?**

Macbeth is the last in a line of four of Shakespeare's tragedies that deal with spiritual evil rather than domestic or political violence: *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare examines the consequences of disrupting the natural order of things, of going against God and heaven. The Elizabethan world was making the transition from the complete domination of the Catholic Church and God over a man's fate toward the idea that man can influence his own fate. Macbeth is tempted by the supernatural, then takes fate into his own hands and reaps the consequences. He commits regicide (killing a king). The Elizabethan world believed in the "chain of being," as EMW Tillyard calls it. God is at the top, having authority over all, with monarchs right after God. Someone lower on the chain killing one higher and upsets the whole world. Things tumble out of control. After Macbeth kills Duncan it is reported that day turns to stormy night, screams were heard from invisible beings, Duncan's horses refuse to behave and eat each other. A hawk is killed by an owl. Macbeth's own wife goes insane. His every attempt to keep control only makes things worse. He kills Banquo to keep everyone from knowing about the witches; predictions and that stirs more suspicion among the thanes. He kills Macduff's family to punish him and creates all out war.

Along the way we are treated to other images of good vs. evil- black (bad) vs. white (good), the increasing references to blood (a sign of disorder), reversals of gender roles, and the lack of sleep

for those who do evil.

Another theme is false or deceptive appearances. Things are not as they seem. Lady Macbeth seems a normal woman, Macbeth seems a grateful soldier and gracious host, the castle seems like a peaceful place, trees seem to walk and sons appeared to have killed fathers. The Macbeths' falseness is again a sin against the natural order of things and s destined to create failure in the end. The falseness of the witches pays them back in their own kind.

Questions abound. Does evil already exist in Macbeth or is it planted there by the witches? Are the witches in league with Lady Macbeth? Does the witches' warning about Macduff make Macbeth kill him or is Macbeth just too far in? It's left for the audience to decide.

What makes it great?

Language. *Macbeth* makes a great example of why Shakespeare was such a great writer: his use of our language. No one has ever matched the way Shakespeare puts words together to accomplish a goal.

For Example:

Macbeth:
If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly: if the 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.

So what's the big deal? Well, first, do we need to know what trammel means? Or surcease? Not really. We get the sense of what Macbeth saying even if we don't know for sure. So, it sounds great to the ear, full of disquiet and indecision, AND, this speech also communicates a huge amount of information about Macbeth to those people who *do* know them. That's a lot for one sentence!

It's also ominous. The sounds that reverberate are of "s's" that sound sinister and words going round on themselves, just like Macbeth's brain is doing. Macbeth is full of twisted dark thoughts that seem to be echoed by the twisted sentences yet no one else speaks like him. It's magnificent and repellent at the same time. Shakespeare's "heroes": Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth and the rest have a heightened language all their own and it's fascinating to see and hear these characters at work.

But the main thing is that it's a WHOLE lot easier to understand if it's seen and heard. ,not read. Shakespeare wrote PLAYS, not books, so let's play ball!

The Elizabethan Playhouse

The theater most associated with Shakespeare, The Globe, was not the only theater in London, but it is the most famous. Others include the Rose, the Curtain (both mentioned in *Shakespeare in Love*) and the Swan. The Blackfriars was an indoor theater used by Shakespeare's company, (known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men, then later as the King's Men.) The others were all open to the sky (the reason being the need for light - no electricity!).

All of the open theatres had arena-type stages (seating on at least three sides), with the poorer audience members (the Groundlings) standing on the ground right up next to the stage, while the more wealthy sat in galleries in a circular fashion all around the "yard" (the open area where the Groundlings stood). The atmosphere was fairly raucous (more like Nascar or professional wrestling), with people constantly moving around, throwing hazelnut shells on the ground and talking - UNLESS they were intrigued by what was going on onstage. We think that with Shakespeare's plays the audience was pretty attentive. There were no intermissions, however, so patrons had to move sometimes. With Shakespeare's plays, they would probably hurry back!

Because the plays took place in the early afternoon and the players (actors) could see the audience and vice versa, it is thought by many scholars that Shakespeare intended for the audience to be involved in the play itself. An actor might refer to an audience member to poke fun at a character not on stage; pretty funny then AND now.

Finally - how long WERE these plays? They seem pretty long on the page. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Prologue mentions "the two hours traffic of our stage..." If the actors really meant that, there would be a very fast pace: no long pauses or slow exits and entrances. This makes sense if you consider that the normal groundling had the attention span of today's 5 year-old and liked to throw things.

Synopsis

Act I

- a) The witches plot.
- b) Everyone is talking about Macbeth, the hero of the battle; the king is going to make him Thane of Cawdor.
- c) The witches again. They make a charm and in come Macbeth and Banquo. They tell Macbeth he will be Thane of Cawdor and then King. They promise that Banquo will be father of kings. The witches leave. Macbeth and Banquo talk it over.
- e) Macbeth and Banquo reach the king, who lavishes praise on them, tells Macbeth he is Thane of Cawdor, then names his own son, Malcolm, Prince of Cumberland and heir to the throne. Macbeth is displeased, but invites everyone to spend the night at his place.
- f) Back at the castle, Lady Macbeth reads a letter from Macbeth about what the witches said. and then finds out the king is spending the night. She's afraid he doesn't have the guts to kill and is

eager for Macbeth to get home so she can pump him up. In he walks.

h) Everyone comes to the castle. While everyone is eating Macbeth is having second thoughts; Lady M comes to get in and berates him for unmanly thoughts. She has a plan.

Act II

a) Banquo is figuring things out.

b) Before the murder, Macbeth starts hallucinating he sees a bloody dagger and starts freaking out.

c) Lady M is waiting outside the king's door while Macbeth is inside. He comes out. Both are REALLY jumpy and upset- especially when Lady M sees the Mr. M forgot to leave the knives with the servants to make it look like they did it. She goes and does it herself and then comes back. They hear a knocking at the front door and have to get back to their bedroom.

d) Comic scene- The drunken porter answers the door after pretending it is the door to Hell. It's Thanes Macduff and Lennox. They want to see the king.

e) Macbeth (who happens to be awake) takes Macduff to the king's room and pretends to be surprised when the king is discovered dead. Pandemonium breaks out. Macbeth reveals that, in a moment of "fury," he killed the guards who "committed the murder." When Macduff asks questions, Lady M faints to divert attention.

f) The king's sons, Donalbain and Malcolm, figure out that it's not safe for them there and decide to leave the country.

g) Macbeth is named king; Macduff is not pleased.

Act III

a) Macbeth arranges to have Banquo murdered.

b) Lady M is uneasy. Macbeth is acting strange and won't talk about it.

c) A royal banquet begins (without Banquo). The murderers show up and tell Macbeth that they got Banquo, but his son Fleance got away.

e) Back at the party, Macbeth thinks he sees the ghost of Banquo and goes crazy; party over.

f) The witches are back- and Hecate, head of witches, is angry with them for messing with Macbeth and not telling her.

g) Lennox and other thanes are getting suspicious. They find out Macduff has fled to England to get help.

Act IV

a) The witches again, making ANOTHER charm. Macbeth "happens" to visit the witches to find out what's going on. They give him 3 predictions and he feels invincible.

b) At Macduff's house, Lady Macduff is upset that Dad has run away. She tells the son that Dad was a traitor. Macbeth's men come in and kill them.

c) Macduff's in England trying to persuade Malcolm to come back to Scotland. Malcolm tests Macduff's loyalty, but Malcolm passes. Ross comes in and tells Macduff that his family has been murdered. Macduff promises revenge.

Act V

- a) Lady M has gone insane with guilt. The doctor and the lady- in -waiting watch her sleepwalking and trying to wash invisible blood off her hands.
- b) Malcolm and the army have arrived and surround the castle. Macbeth's soldiers are unhappy and are starting to run away one by one.
- c) Macbeth is depressed but, hey- he's invincible so he's not worried. He gets the bad news about his wife from the doctor and tells him to cure her.
- e) Macbeth is still feeling pretty good- when he hears screams. A soldier tells him his wife is dead- she's committed suicide. The battle's started, Macbeth is feeling bad but keeps fighting, Macduff finds him and kills him then presents the head to Malcolm, the new king.

Post-performance

People/Happenings in the play

Matching

Match the correct quotation or description with the person. There may be more than one answer.

- | | |
|-----------------------|---|
| 1. Lady Macbeth _____ | a) "out, out brief candle" |
| 2. Duncan _____ | b) prods Macbeth to murder |
| 3. Macbeth _____ | c) "out damned spot" |
| 4. Malcolm _____ | d) "something wicked this way comes" |
| 5. Witches _____ | e) "what he hath lost, noble Macbeth hath won" |
| 6. Banquo _____ | f) son of Duncan |
| 7. Macduff _____ | g) "double, double toil and trouble" |
| | h) "Come what come may" |
| | i) will father a line of kings |
| | j) "turn hell-hound, turn" |
| | k) "milk of human kindness" |
| | l) "screw your courage to the sticking place" |
| | m) kills Macbeth |
| | n) "nothing in his life became him like the leaving of it" |
| | o) "look like th'innocent flower, But be the serpent under't" |

Multiple Choice

- 1) A thane is:
 - a) a witch b) a nobleman c) a Scottish food d) a weapon
- 2) "Something wicked this way comes" refers to:
 - a) the witches b) Macduff c) Macbeth d) Lady Macbeth

- 3) Macbeth and Banquo are _____.
- a) relatives b) comrades c) enemies d) father and son e) none of these
- 4) Macbeth dies by:
- a) poison b) the sword of Macduff c) witchcraft c) the sword of Banquo
- 5.) In all of Shakespeare's plays, you are shown or promised- sex, violence or the supernatural in the first 10 minutes. Which of these opens *Macbeth*?
- a) sex b) violence c) the supernatural d) b & c e) all of the above
- 6) At the beginning of the play, Macbeth is:
- a) king b) Thane of Cawdor c) Thane of Fife d) Thane of Glamis e) none of the above
- 7) Who is the comic relief in *Macbeth*?
- a) Banquo b) Fleance c) Lady Macduff d) the porter e) the murderers
- 8) Macbeth is torn about killing Duncan because:
- a) they are related b) he's Duncan's host and has the duty to protect him. c) Duncan is a gentle and virtuous person d) he's Duncan's subject e) all of the above.
- 9) Anon means:
- a) a religious person b) later c) hurriedly d) separately
- 10) The "weird sisters" are:
- a) a constellation b) the witches c) Lady Macbeth and her relatives d) a rock band.

Language

Match the original lines with the modern meaning.

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1) "Too full of the Milk of human kindness." | a) if there were no consequences, then I should do it quickly do the deed |
| 2) "there's daggers in men's smiles" | b) you show me where to go |
| 3) "But wherefore could I not pronounce "amen"?" | c) Each day creeps along- barren and boring- and will to the end of time. |
| 4) "False face must hide what the false heart doth know" | d) Men are smiling but are thinking evil thoughts. |
| 5) "that is a step on which I must fall down, or else o'erleap" | e) too weak and humane. |
| 6) "If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well It were done quickly." | f) Why couldn't I say "amen?" |
| | g) don't show your true nasty intentions on your face. |
| 7) " Art thou afeard To be the same in thine own act and valour | h) too much talk stops me from acting. |
| | i) That's going to be an impediment to me, |

5) Many argue that women in the Elizabethan era had no power and that Lady Macbeth is a prime example of that. Do you agree or disagree? Support your argument.

5) Who is responsible for Duncan's murder? (with examples from the text).

6) The number 3 could represent evil to the Elizabethans. Give examples of all the ways the number 3 appears in *Macbeth*.

7) In staging *Macbeth*, one question to be answered is whether to actually have the ghost of Banquo appear on stage or not. Is it more or less effective to the scene to have him appear? Support your argument.

Final questions:

What, in Shakespeare's world, made it necessary as a playwright, to write this play and to make Banquo the good guy?

Kenneth Branagh has talked about setting a movie of *Macbeth* on Wall Street. Would this work? Why or why not?