

Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

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with the Classic Players production of *Macbeth*

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Shakespeare's Artistic Accomplishment in *Macbeth*

Macbeth is the story of a hero turned villain. It explores the cause and consequence of sin, tracing the downfall of an ambitious man whose deliberate commitment to evil destroys him and his kingdom. Since Shakespeare's own age *Macbeth* has remained a popular piece for both the study and the stage although it was written as a script to be performed, not a text to be read and scrutinized.

Many elements of the play contribute to its success as pure entertainment, among them its dramatic plot and characters, its irony, spectacle and suspense: Macbeth wavers concerning the murder of Duncan, even right outside the door to his chamber; the prophecies of the Witches and Apparitions prove one by one to be ironic; and Lady Macbeth experiences self-loathing and horror that culminate in her sleepwalking episodes.

Shakespeare's early audiences would have found the play's supernatural elements, especially the Witches, very captivating. Their association with Satan's domain creates an atmosphere of darkness appropriate to the action of the plot, and they also effectively introduce the major theme of equivocation. Rather than intending to promote communication with such insidious creatures, Shakespeare implies that they are to be shunned.

Finally, Shakespeare's brilliant use of all such engaging dramatic devices is enhanced by his rich poetry, a feature which his



Shawn MacDonald & Philip Eoute as Lady Macbeth & Macbeth, Classic Players 2013

audience's ears were more attuned to appreciate upon casual hearing than are ours today. *Macbeth* abounds in well-integrated images of blood and darkness; sleeplessness and guilt; medicine, doctors, disease and healing—all of which converge to show the inescapable consequences of sin. ☞

Macbeth & King Saul

Although Shakespeare does not refer to I Samuel 28 in *Macbeth*, interesting parallels exist between the character Macbeth and Israel's first king, Saul. Filled with fear about the future, both men consulted women with familiar spirits. Both were intent upon knowing how long they would reign and who would succeed them. Both were told that their armies would fall to the enemy, they would die and their virtuous rivals would take their thrones.

The prophecies proffered to both men were summoned by witches. Neither narrative tells us whether the witches brought up the real spirit of a departed saint or a demon impersonating him. The marginal gloss in the Geneva Bible (the version Shakespeare refers to most often) offers the opinion that although Saul supposed that the prophecy reported to him by the witch of Endor came from Samuel, actually "it was Satan, who to blind [Saul's] eyes took upon him the form of Samuel, as he can do of an angel

of light." King James offered a similar reading of I Samuel 28 in *Demonology*. More recent Bible scholars, however, suggest that God Himself, not the witch of Endor, brought Samuel back to reveal Saul's fate.

By making the fictional drama of Macbeth and Banquo parallel to the biblical account of Saul and David, Shakespeare underlines the legitimacy of James I as king of England. ☞

The Ironic Culmination of Evil

Macbeth's crimes disrupt nature and society. None of them is more heinous than the murder of Macduff's wife and children, which represents the destruction of an entire family unit.

Appropriately, then, it is through the agency of children that Macbeth's downfall is finally brought about. The Second and Third Apparitions called up by the Witches are children. A "Bloody Child" promises Macbeth concerning his future, "[N]one of woman born/Shall harm Macbeth" (IV.i.80–81). Then a "Child crowned, with a tree in his hand" quiets his fears by declaring, "Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until/ Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill/Shall come against him" (IV.i.92–94).

These equivocal prophecies come from the mouths of children who seem to represent Macduff and Malcolm. They convince Macbeth that he will "live the lease of nature" (IV.i.99), that is, that no one can kill him; he will die of natural causes.

But in the play's rapid finale these prophecies turn round to haunt him. First, a messenger informs Macbeth that as he was looking toward Birnam, "[t]he wood began to move" (V. v. 33). Recalling the Third Apparition, Macbeth reacts to this announcement of a seemingly impossible physical phenomenon with despondency.

The moving grove is, in fact, Malcolm's soldiers, who carry boughs to camouflage their approach to Dunsinane. The army includes many youths who are just on the verge of manhood. They have neither beards nor experience in battle. Figuratively, then, it is children who rise up against Macbeth, and they are aided by nature, who provides their screen of leaves.

Macbeth, recalling the Second Apparition with a burst of impetuous fury, decides to rush into battle. Still depending on the prophecy of the Bloody Child who urged that he fear no man born of woman, Macbeth fights boldly against the



Elizabeth Rogers, Danette Rogers, Melissa Rogers and Meredith Rogers, *Classic Players* 1993

English forces for a time. But as he and Macduff clash, the latter announces that he is not "of woman born," a play on words referring to his surgical extraction from his mother. Macbeth then realizes that he has misinterpreted the prophecy on which his security has depended. Once his false hope has evaporated, Macbeth fights desperately before falling to Macduff.

Thus both the prophecies that lead to Macbeth's destruction are fulfilled by figurative children: the army of youths that resembles a moving forest is led by Macduff, who as a babe defied that which is usual by his untimely birth. The cycle of sin and retribution is complete, with those who have destroyed others at last being destroyed themselves. ☹

Source, Plot and Structure

As in almost all of Shakespeare's plays, the plot of *Macbeth* is not an original one. Story writing was not a major concern of the Renaissance playwright, who usually chose for his plot a familiar story and used it as a means of expressing a worthwhile theme. The source to which Shakespeare turned most often for a good story was Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (2nd ed., 1587), a work that mingles historical fact with legend and fiction.

For *Macbeth* he drew from three separate, unrelated accounts of assassinations. The plot and characters he finally created bear little resemblance to their source. Shakespeare alters, adds to and combines the elements of Holinshed to create a

powerful, unified and penetrating tale of a politically ambitious man's betrayal of himself to evil.

The most dramatic new scenes created by Shakespeare are the banquet scene in which Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost (III.iv) and Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene (V.i). Both are important in portraying the guilt and personal agony brought about by sin.

The shape of the plot of *Macbeth* is indebted also to the medieval morality play tradition. Like its ancestors, *Macbeth* depicts man's deliberate choice between good and evil and the consequences of that choice. The temptation that prompts the main character to make such a choice

also subjects him to inner conflict. In most of the medieval moralities, a character with a universal name like Everyman or Mankind finally rejects the Vice that tempts him to evil and chooses the course of action that leads to salvation.

Macbeth, however, tempted internally by his ambition to be king and externally by the Witches and Lady Macbeth, chooses the way of equivocation and murder, usurpation and tyranny, which leads to remorse, isolation, spiritual agony and death. *Macbeth* thus paints the portrait of a man who plunges headlong into evil in order to attain worldly power and position. In the end they profit him nothing. ☹

Lady Macbeth

Macbeth's indecision concerning the assassination of Duncan contrasts with Lady Macbeth's single-minded resolve to carry out the evil plan she conceives. She is calculating and strong willed but does not foresee the ghastliness of the crime she proposes. Her husband, on the other hand, fully envisions its consequences but initially lacks her determination.

As the play unfolds, the two reverse positions, Macbeth becoming bolder, even reckless, and his wife withdrawing into a private world of inner torment. While Macbeth becomes less humane, Lady Macbeth becomes more sympathetic.

Unlike the Witches, who represent pure evil, Lady Macbeth is humanity tainted by evil. The temptation she puts before Macbeth is much more persuasive than theirs because of her fair appearance. Still, she is a seductive agent of a temptation that originates with Satan and the powers of darkness.

Lady Macbeth's Act I soliloquy reveals the major difference between her nature and her husband's. She fears Macbeth's "milk of human kindness" and regards him as one who has ambition but no "illness" to accompany it. Macbeth is not by nature opportunistic. But to his wife the means by which one achieves the desired end—in this case, the crown—is irrelevant.

Lady Macbeth therefore violates natural law by giving over to demons her creative power of bearing children in exchange for the destructive boldness to murder Duncan. In a prayer to evil spirits she rejects all that is natural and healthy and chooses instead sterility and destruction. This speech includes the images of evil that are later prominently associated with the Macbeths' crime of murder: the raven, blood, remorse, night, hell, darkness.

The unnatural condition into which Lady Macbeth so willingly enters accounts for her ability in a later scene to declare coldly that she would go so far as to dash out the brains of her own child were it necessary to achieve her end (I. vii.54–59a). She experiences no inner conflict or irresolution as she advises Macbeth to

look innocent "But be the serpent under't" (I. v. 65). She is totally given over to evil. She later realizes, however, the error of her opportunistic thinking as her conscience begins to torment her: "Nought's had, all's spent, / Where our desire is got without content" (III.ii.4–5). Although she has implored the spirits to "stop up the access and passage to remorse," they have denied her this important part of her request. (I.v.43). ☹



Shawn MacDonald as Lady Macbeth, *Classic Players* 2013



MACBETH



THE TRAGEDY OF MACBETH

Setting: Ancient Scotland



LADY MACBETH

Three Witches, the “Weird Sisters,” prepare to meet Macbeth, a Scottish general, upon a “blasted heath” when the day’s battle has ended.

After defeating a rebel uprising led by the thane of Cawdor against King Duncan, Macbeth and Banquo come upon the Weird Sisters. They predict that Macbeth will be thane of Cawdor and king of Scotland and that Banquo’s descendants will be kings. The Witches’ first prophecy is fulfilled almost immediately as King Duncan bestows upon Macbeth the title of Cawdor. The prophecies, along with the prodding of his wife, Lady Macbeth, inflame Macbeth’s own ambition to be king.

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth plan the murder of the virtuous King Duncan and carry it out as he sleeps in their castle. Malcolm, the heir to Duncan’s throne, flees to England, and Donalbain, his brother, goes to Ireland. The young men become suspects in their father’s murder, and Macbeth is crowned king of Scotland. Fearing the Weird Sisters’ prediction that Banquo’s descendants will be kings, Macbeth has Banquo murdered. His son Fleance, however, escapes.

After Banquo’s Ghost haunts Macbeth at a formal banquet, he seeks out the Weird

Sisters to have his future foretold. They produce equivocal visions that give Macbeth a false sense of security.

Later when Macbeth suspects that Macduff, the thane of Fife, is plotting against him, he has Lady Macduff and all her children murdered. Macduff, however, has already fled to England to urge Malcolm to return to Scotland and claim the crown.

Macbeth gradually becomes a cruel and hardened tyrant, tortured by guilt and haunted by ghosts. His immorality subjects his whole kingdom to social and political collapse.

Lady Macbeth, unable to bear an evil conscience, is driven to madness and eventually to suicide.

Malcolm marches against Macbeth with a combined English and Scottish army.

In desperation the tyrant engages in hand-to-hand combat with Macduff, the very man whose innocent family he has slain.

The outcome of the plot is the only solution possible if justice is to triumph—death for the tyrant and the reestablishment of order in the kingdom by its rightful ruler, Duncan’s son, Malcolm. ♡



MALCOLM



BANQUO



MACDUFF



DUNCAN



“Witches can raise storms and tempests in the air, either upon sea or land, though not universally, but in such prescribed bounds as God will permit them.”
—King James I of England

“The Witches unite ugliness, evil, and power in the service of disorder. And they seek Macbeth.”
—Sidney Lamb

“In Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* evil is palpable; yet it leads man to emptiness, to disillusionment, to ‘nothing’ as Macbeth finds out; the powers of darkness have an endless capacity to delude and deceive—the devil is a liar.”
—Dennis Bartholomeusz

Katrina Case, Meagan Jones & Kaitlyn Chisholm as the Witches, *Classic Players 2013*

The Witches

Macbeth presents evil in two forms: natural and supernatural. As the plot unfolds, Macbeth’s appalling descent into crime transforms him into the epitome of human evil. But evil also exists outside Shakespeare’s natural man in the play’s supernatural world of black magic.

The three Witches, called the Weird Sisters, are the most striking manifestations of this second sort of evil. Their stormy meeting in scene one, which establishes the play’s tone of supernatural evil, introduces them as embodiments of the devil, agents of moral disruption.

In early 17th-century England the term “witch” denoted a woman possessed by a minor evil spirit, called a “familiar,” that helped her carry out evil deeds. Also known as “imps,” such attendants usually took the form of an animal or bird. Shakespeare provides the Witches in *Macbeth* with companion spirits who possess them and whom they must serve: a cat for the First Witch, a toad for the Second Witch and an owl for the Third Witch.

Witches were said to bear a red mark, called the “devil’s mark,” from which familiars sucked their blood. Lady Macbeth alludes to such a mark in her soliloquy that begins, “Out, damned spot!”

Although the Witches have supernatural powers—to sail in sieves, travel through the air, cause fogs and tempests, kill animals, and predict the future—they do not have the power to destroy Macbeth. Their prophecies do not force him into an evil course of action. He is a free will agent who is morally responsible for his own deeds. The Witches’ prophecies lure him to his own destruction, thus making his tragic fall more compelling.

The last two lines of scene one, intoned by the Witches, introduce the inversion of values that predominates until the very end

of *The Tragedy of Macbeth*: “Fair is foul, and foul is fair.” The Witches are immoral creatures who regard good things as evil and evil things as good, and Macbeth, like them, aligns himself with the foul and unnatural as the play progresses.

The unnatural ingredients of the Witches’ brew in Act IV correspond to recipes in classical demonology. Their gory concoction, supposedly a means of raising evil spirits, is described graphically to establish an atmosphere of horror and doom, foreshadowing Macbeth’s frightful end.

The Witches are also fiends who equivocate or, as Macbeth realizes too late in the tragedy, “lie like truth.” At Macbeth’s reckless insistence that he be shown the future, they produce three prophetic apparitions. The first warns Macbeth, “Beware Macduff!” The Second and Third give him equivocal assurances that he cannot be defeated by his enemies. On the surface these prophecies seem to suggest that Macbeth is invincible. They flatter him and give him a false sense of security. But each prophecy also has a second, ominous meaning that Macbeth overlooks.

The Witches next produce a Show of Kings for Macbeth, featuring a procession of the eight generations of King James’ royal forebears.

Led by James’ fictional ancestor, Banquo, the Show presents Robert II, Robert III, James I, James II, James III, James IV, James V and finally James VI of Scotland, who is himself England’s King James I and Shakespeare’s patron. James VI holds a mirror that represents the perpetuity of his line. Shakespeare’s gratifying suggestion is that King James’ offspring will reign over England until the Judgment Day.

It is interesting to note that James’ royal forebears were actually eight in number. Shakespeare may have intentionally omitted

James’ mother, Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots. Because of her promiscuity and her implication in the murder of his father, James as king of Scotland had apparently considered her an embarrassment, making only formal protest when she was executed as a traitor to England’s Elizabeth I in 1587.

Just before his death Macbeth recognizes the Witches for what they are, “juggling fiends” “[t]hat palter with us in a double sense.” As their prophecies turn ominously true, Macbeth acts in desperation and falls to Macduff’s sword.

Shakespeare’s audience would have regarded Macbeth’s initial pleasure in the Witches’ prophecies as dangerous, not because of their content but because of their source—Satan. Orthodox Protestants and Catholics alike recognized that those who consult the forces of darkness are led in paths of darkness. Trouble, anguish, despair and judgment ultimately come upon them.

Renaissance theologians further taught that God purposes and brings to pass every event in the universe. He alone has certain knowledge of the future. Man’s only access to that truth is through the Holy Spirit, Christ and God’s Word, which reveals all that is necessary to ensure man’s eternal destiny. The person who turns to wizards, fortunetellers or other mediums to foretell the future has turned away from God. *Macbeth* is ultimately a play about the darkness that goes along with “the instruments of darkness.”

Although Shakespeare acknowledges the power of evil in *Macbeth*, he offsets it with the portrayal of goodness, truth and loyalty through such characters as Duncan, Banquo, Malcolm and Macduff. ♡



The Tree of Life

In ancient Scotland the forest was the matrix of life. Trees supplied nuts, berries, medicines, shelter and wood for fire. When the land was cleared, one great tree was left in the middle of the clearing. This tree was referred to as the Tree of Life. Pagan tribes regarded it as an object connected to both the upper world, with its branches reaching to the sky, and the nether regions, with its roots stretching beneath the earth. The greatest atrocity one tribe could commit against another was to cut down its mother tree.

In Shakespeare’s age trees represented family genealogy. The line of Banquo and Fleance is shown as an intricate genealogical tree in John Leslie’s 1578 history of the Scots. In more modern cultures trees are often looked upon as symbols of a family’s rootedness, cohesion and growth through time. Like a tree, a family roots and anchors its members, identifies them, connects them to the past and present, and locates them in the world.

Shakespeare employs images of seeds, trees, branches and leaves in *Macbeth* to suggest both nature and growth or fecundity in general. Macbeth is an enemy to life and growth. He is intent upon having the Witches prophesy his future, even if to do so they must destroy the seeds of all life. His reckless disregard of the value of life brings him to the low point of seeing his own life as nothing more than a pile of withered leaves.

Trees also appear as symbols of nature’s resistance to Macbeth’s unnatural crimes. Shakespeare borrowed the idea of Birnam Woods’ “march” toward Dunsinane from Gaelic tales that compare armies to forests.

For the *Classic Players 2003* production of *Macbeth* designer Jeffrey Stegall and design assistant Jason Waggoner collaborated to create a curtain that foreshadows the tree of life that will dominate the set after the fall of Macbeth. Once the tyrant has been brought down, Scotland and her families have a renewed hope for life, growth, cohesiveness and fruitfulness. ♡

Macbeth at BJU

The 2013 Classic Players production of *Macbeth* marks the eleventh time the Scottish tragedy has been performed at Bob Jones University. It was first performed in 1933 and then in 1936, 1941, 1946, 1956, 1967, 1976, 1985, 1993 and 2003. In seven of ten runs Bob Jones Jr., appeared as Macbeth. Five times Elizabeth Edwards played opposite him as Lady Macbeth. The 2003 production marked Bob Jones III's third appearance as the title character and Beneth Jones' third appearance as Lady Macbeth. ∞



Elizabeth Edwards & Bob Jones Jr., 1976



Bob Jones III & Beneth Jones, 2003

Historical Background: Macbeth's Appeal to King James I

Determining the dates and order of composition for Shakespeare's plays is no easy matter, but most scholars agree that *Macbeth* dates from around 1606.

For one reason, at least three works written in 1607 by other playwrights allude to *Macbeth*. The play was probably performed before King James I on August 7, 1606, during a state visit from King Christian of Denmark, brother of James' wife, Queen Anne.

Regardless of when King James saw a performance of *Macbeth*, he must have been pleased with a work intended by the playwright to appeal to the patron of his theatrical company, the King's Men, in several ways. Most obviously, the play's subject is Scottish history, and James I was the king of Scotland, who ascended the throne of England in 1603 after Queen Elizabeth I died without any heirs.

In addition, *Macbeth* promotes the myth of the glorious ancestry of the Stuart kings by presenting Banquo and Fleance as historical forebears of their line. In reality, the Stuarts descended from an 11th-century family of stewards, or household managers, from Brittany and later Scotland. The family's most illustrious member, Walter, was knighted for valorous deeds in 1315 and later married the daughter of the Scottish King Robert. Thus Walter Stewart's offspring became royalty.

Historians in the service of the Stuart monarchy, however, preferred to trace Walter back to a fictional king named Banquo, thus sparing their monarch the embarrassment of a lowly ancestry. Similarly, court historians under Queen Elizabeth I, whose ancestors were Welsh stewards, traced her ancestry back to the fictional King Arthur.

Shakespeare, in addition, paints a wholly sympathetic picture of Banquo as a man of great integrity who, unlike Macbeth, withstands temptation. The Show of Kings in *Macbeth* (IV.i) must have been especially gratifying to James, for it suggests that the line of Banquo's descendants will be unusually long, stretching "to th' crack of doom."

Another way in which *Macbeth* must have appealed to the king is in its strong condemnation of witchcraft. James had himself

been the intended victim of witchcraft plots and had written a treatise on the occult, *Demonology* (1597), calling for severe measures against sorcerers. It is likely that Shakespeare had access to several of the king's published works before writing the play. Many of his biblical allusions in *Macbeth* parallel James' references.

Finally, Shakespeare's spectacular play about regicide appeared less than a year after a notorious failed attempt on the life of his royal master, King James. On November 4, 1605, Guy Fawkes was arrested by the king's officers in the cellar beneath London's House of Lords with 60 barrels of gunpowder and devices for lighting fuses. Fawkes was accused of plotting with a group of Roman Catholics to blow up the king and his entire government in order to install a Catholic regime over England.

Father Henry Garnet, a Jesuit priest, was among those tried and executed for complicity in the Gunpowder Plot. He had written a book defending perjury committed for the cause of Catholicism and instructing Jesuits how to make ambiguous statements under oath. Its title is *A Treatise of Equivocation*, and equivocation—the use of misleading language that is subject to two or more conflicting interpretations—is a major motif in *Macbeth*. Equivocation is the stock-in-trade of the Witches, who tell Macbeth half-truths to his ultimate ruin.

In Shakespeare's well-known scene of comic relief, the Porter envisions the entrance of an equivocator into hell. His talk about a man who committed treason "for God's sake" alludes to Father Garnet, who allegedly plotted against the king's life and then equivocated under oath, all for the sake of his religion. The Porter also welcomes at hell's gate "a farmer that hang'd himself." Garnet's pseudonym as an underground Catholic priest in Protestant England was "Mr. Farmer." ∞

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