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THE LAUREL  SHAKESPEARE

Macbeth

Francis Fergusson, General Editor

With a Modern Commentary by

FLORA ROBSON



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The Laurel Shakespeare

Francis Fergusson, General Editor

Macbeth

by William Shakespeare



Text edited by Charles Jasper Sisson

Commentary by Flora Robson



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CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| <i>Introduction by the General Editor</i> | 7 |
| <i>Suggestions for further reading</i> | 23 |
| <i>Notes on Playing the Role of Lady Macbeth</i> <i>by Flora Robson</i> | 27 |
| <i>Macbeth</i> | 34 |
| <i>Shakespeare and His Theatre by Francis Fergusson</i> | 159 |
| <i>Suggestions for further reading</i> | 179 |
| <i>Glossary Notes: H. H. Smith, Editor</i> | 185 |
| <i>Note on the General Editor</i> | 189 |
| <i>Note on the Type and Layout</i> | 189 |

Introduction by the General Editor

Macbeth was written in 1605-1606, very near *King Lear*, when Shakespeare was at the height of his power. Many critics regard it as the greatest of the tragedies. It is easy to agree with them while one is under its spell.

The story, the main characters, and the dark setting in eleventh-century Scotland, are derived from Holinshed's *Chronicles*. Shakespeare combined the story of Macbeth with that of Donwald's murder of King Duffe, to suit his poetic purpose. He was not trying to write a history, and he knew no doubt that Holinshed's account of that remote time was itself a mixture of fact and legend. But the story had also a topical interest: James of Scotland, who had ascended the English throne in 1603, was supposed to be a descendant of the Banquo of the play. It is probable that Shakespeare wrote it for performance at James's court; certainly it would have had special interest for the King. As a young man James had written his *Daemonologie*, an attempt to get at the truth in the popular superstitions about witches. As a learned amateur theologian, he would have appreciated the fine points in the philosophy of evil underlying the play. As a ruler, he would have watched the career of Macbeth, murderous usurper of the Scottish throne, with fascination. One can trace all of these elements in *Macbeth*; but for us, and for all ages, it lives as the most terrible murder story ever written, and as a poem which haunts the imagination like music.

It is the shortest and most concentrated of the tragedies, and Shakespeare gets it under way with more than his usual speed. The brief appearance of the Witches (Act I, Scene 1) suggests that unnatural powers are abroad, seeking Macbeth; their childish doggerel, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair," tells us that things are not what they seem in Scotland. Good old King Duncan with his sons and attendants

enters to meet the "bleeding Captain" who has news of a great battle (Scene 2); and Duncan also finds that things are not what they seem. "Doubtful it stood," says the gasping Captain, of the battle, "as two spent swimmers, that do cling together/ And choke their art." The battle is between the Scotch under their generals Macbeth and Banquo, and the invading Norwegians allied with the Scottish traitor the Thane of Cawdor. The Scotch seem to be winning; then losing: "So from that spring, whence comfort seemed to come,/ Discomfort swells." The Captain faints before he can finish his story, but Ross appears to let us know that the Scotch were victorious at last, mainly because of Macbeth's demoniac fighting, and that Cawdor is dead. King Duncan decides to reward Macbeth with the traitor's title—and that too sounds sinister and ambiguous, though poor old Duncan means it so well.

The effect of these two scenes is to focus interest on Scotland, now threatened with mysterious dangers. As in all of Shakespeare's plays about kings, the fate of the monarchy underlies and frames the action: *Macbeth* will not end until the monarchy is firmly established again. But in this play more than in any other, Shakespeare is interested in evil itself: in the way men feel its pull, in the ways in which it may affect the individual and society. In these opening scenes he builds in our imagination the dark and deceptive atmosphere, the "world of the play," where evil finds its opportunity. This atmosphere affects all of the characters; their motives are hasty and irrational: even Duncan, good as he is, is caught in this drive. He overdoes his rewards to Macbeth; soon he will be racing to Macbeth's castle, supposedly to receive hospitality and honor, actually to meet his death.

But it is when we meet Macbeth (Scene 3) that the action of the play begins to take on its full power. He and Banquo, leaving the field of battle, meet the Witches who have been expecting them, and Macbeth's first line echoes the Witches' chant of Scene 1: "So fair and foul a day I have not seen." Macbeth is not only the protagonist, agent

and victim of evil; he is also the character who sees most deeply into what is going on. It has often been pointed out that he is both a powerful and ambitious warrior, and a suffering poet and seer. Perhaps Shakespeare thought of him as one of the Celtic Scots, a distant cousin of the Welsh Glendower, who was also fighter, bard, and magician in one. It is Macbeth's subtle imagination that makes him so susceptible to temptation; but it also gives him his appalling insight into his own human passion and torment. In the sequence of his monologues in Act I we watch the murderous motivation grow; we can see how it looks from inside—in its own nightmarish light—and also in the sober light of Macbeth's reason.

When the Witches tell him (Act I, Scene 3) that he will be Thane of Cawdor, and then King, they feed the secret dream he had shared only with his Lady. When Ross greets him as Thane of Cawdor, he is caught up—"rapt," as Banquo notices—in a vision of supreme power (line 127):

Two truths are told,
As happy prologues to the swelling act
Of the imperial theme.

But he knows, in a moment, that the Witches' truth is double-edged:

This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill, cannot be good.

And he sees, with dismay, that it has overpowered him:

. . . why do I yield to that suggestion,
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature?

He is alternating between his vision of murder as absolute power, and his vision of the same murder as reason and commonsense reveal it. In this paradoxical experience, he concludes, "nothing is/ But what is not."

In the very next scene (Scene 4) he learns that Duncan will spend the night at his castle; and now it seems all but certain that fate, or hidden powers, have decreed that he shall have the crown by murder. When he joins his Lady, and she tells him (Act I, Scene 5):

Thy letters have transported me beyond
This ignorant present, and I feel now
The future in the instant,

their dream of power seems more real to them than time itself, with its pedestrian facts. But Macbeth recovers even from that. In his great monologue on the brink (Act I, Scene 7) the sense of reality, and time, is back; he is "upon *this* bank and shoal of time," and cannot "jump the life to come." He sees exactly what Duncan's murder will mean:

He's here in double trust;
First, as I am his kinsman, and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself.

Worse than simple slaughter, the murder is treachery of the deepest kind, which Shakespeare (like Dante) regarded as the deathliest sin, for it cuts the root of all trust, without which no human relationship is possible. Macbeth sees that it will violate the feeling of all humanity: "pity, like a naked new-born babe, . . . Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,/ That tears shall drown the wind." In this sober light he sees the murder as the impossible stunt it is, and his crazy drive collapses:

I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself,
And falls on th' other—

But at that moment Lady Macbeth finds him.

Lady Macbeth lacks her husband's double vision, but she is an equally profound image of a human spirit in the grip of evil. The reader is referred to Miss Robson's *Notes*, which are based on her own superb performance in the role. When Lady Macbeth gets the news (Act I, Scene 5), she is as "rapt" as Macbeth, and she too knows that what she wants to do is evil and will not bear the light of day and reason. But she is not appalled, perhaps (as Miss Robson suggests) because she will not perform the butchery directly, but through her husband. Moreover, she can protect herself from the physical horror by rationalizing the corpse as a mere "picture" or "painted devil." Her willful and doctrinaire heartlessness gives us our sharpest sense of human slaughter; but Lady Macbeth herself can repress all natural feeling only until it returns, in the sleepwalking scene, to mock her.

Neither of the Macbeths could perform the murder alone. But they are united in a strong, if unregenerate, love; and as a team they feel omnipotent. "This night's great business," says Lady Macbeth, when her husband first joins her (Act I, Scene 5), "shall to all our nights and days to come/ Give solely sovereign sway, and masterdom." When Macbeth loses this power-drive, she gives it to him again; and, sustained by her naïve will, he can say:

I am settled, and bend up
Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.
Away, and mock the time with fairest show.
False face must hide what the false heart doth know.

Those lines sum up very briefly the themes of concealment, of trying to outwit or "mock" time, and of the murder as an unnatural tour de force. So ends Act I.

No one can miss the excitement of the offstage murder (Act II, Scene 2) as reported first by Lady Macbeth, with her glassy self-command, and then by Macbeth, grotesquely helpless after his "feat." The murder marks a crucial stage in the movement of the play. It is a good idea to pause a

moment, to see how Shakespeare reveals this turning-point from several different angles.

First there is the Porter who comes (Act II, Scene 3) to answer the knocking that frightened the Macbeths. He is resentful at being waked up with a hangover, and he lets three imaginary sinners into hell before he opens the real door to the real knockers. His imaginary sinners were all familiar types. The farmer raises the price when crops are scarce, and absurdly hangs himself when they are abundant. The equivocator is one of the Jesuits who were intriguing against the government; they believed it right to equivocate in defense of their persecuted religion; i.e., "for God's sake." The tailor has stolen cloth from his customer's already tight French-style breeches. All three absurdly tried to outwit evil by evil means, and are thus brothers-under-the-skin of Macbeth.

When the Porter at last lets in Macduff and Lennox he plays a final variation on his farcical theme. He makes them wait while he recounts his adventure with drink, "an equivocator with lechery." He had wrestled with drink, and after an even and dubious struggle, had "cast him." His drunkenness is grossly physical, but it reminds us of the Macbeths' more terrible inebriation and their even contest with it. Some readers, including even Coleridge, have found the Porter too coarse for their taste. But Shakespeare knew that a deep motive affects the whole being, including the body and its functions. Having shown the insane drive of evil in the high moral imagination of Macbeth, he now reveals it in the most homely, lewd and farcical analogies. Moreover, he wants his audience to recover, for a moment, from the excitement of the murder, and reflect that all Scotland is now entering the gates of hell.

The lords summoned by the clanging of the bell are at first too bewildered to think. But Macbeth, while they eye him, and while he maintains his pretense of innocence, is realizing his plight in all its hopelessness. Everything he says has a double meaning, which the audience can understand (Act II, Scene 3):