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MACBETH

麦克佩斯

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Oxford School Shakespeare

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麦克佩斯

edited by

Roma Gill, OBE

M. A. Cantab. B. Litt. Oxon.

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Macbeth: A play for the king

When Elizabeth I of England was dying, childless, she named James VI of Scotland as her successor. He became James I of England.

In August 1606 James was at Hampton Court, a palace near London, entertaining his brother-in-law, King Christian of Denmark. A play was acted for them, *Macbeth*, written by the best dramatist of the time, William Shakespeare. It was a new play, but the story was an old one. James knew it well, because it was about ancestors, Banquo and Fleance, through whom he had inherited the throne of Scotland.

Shakespeare found the story in *The History of Scotland*, by Raphael Holinshed, but his play is much more than a dramatic re-writing of the historical facts. He made many changes, and the biggest of these concerned James's ancestor. In the true story, Banquo joined Macbeth in killing Duncan; but clearly it would be tactless to suggest that James was descended from a regicide—the murderer of a king. So Shakespeare's Banquo is innocent.

James also believed that he was descended spiritually from the long tradition of English monarchs, and that he had inherited the power of healing that Edward the Confessor (1042–66) possessed. Shakespeare's description of this power (4, 3, 146–56) is, to some extent, deliberate flattery of his king. Shakespeare also knew that James was extremely interested in witchcraft, and had written a book about it.

Macbeth is certainly a play 'fit for a king'.

But of course it is more than this—more than flattery for an ancient British monarch; and although the story is largely true, we do not read *Macbeth* as 'history'. We could interpret Shakespeare's play as a moral lesson. Macbeth murders his king. To murder any man is a crime, but those who lived at the time of Shakespeare thought that the murder of a *king* was the greatest of all crimes. Kings were appointed by God, to rule as His deputies: rebellion against a true king was rebellion against God. By murdering Duncan, Macbeth gains the crown; but he loses love, friendship, respect—and in the end his life. His crime is rightly punished.

There is still more to the play. On one 'level' it is royal entertainment—and entertainment, too, for all those of us who

enjoy the suspense and excitement of a murder story. On another level, it teaches us, in a new way, the old lesson that crime does not pay. But there are two more levels.

As we look at the character of Macbeth we see, more clearly than we are able to see in real life, the effects of uncontrolled ambition on a man who is, except for his ambition, noble in nature. Macbeth has full knowledge of right and wrong; he knows that he has committed a very great crime by murdering Duncan. Shakespeare shows us how Macbeth becomes hardened to his crimes, and yet how he suffers from fears which he has created himself.

On the last level, the play has great power as a work of poetry and imagination. The language is rich in sound and meaning, full of pictures, and immensely varied. Take this episode, for example. When Macbeth comes from the murder of Duncan, his hands are covered in the king's blood; he looks at them, and feels that all the waters in the ocean cannot wash away the blood, but that

this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red. (2, 2, 61-3)

The word 'multitudinous' gives a sense of vastness, and 'incarnadine' (meaning 'redden') is another impressive word; its length and sound give strength to the meaning. The two words are more Latin than English, and were very new to the English language; Shakespeare was one of the first writers to use them. They are followed by the simplest, most direct words. Imagine a film camera. First the camera shows you a picture of endless waters, stretching as far as the eye can see: then a sudden close-up picture, perhaps a small pool of green water that turns red with blood as we look at it. Such skill in the use of language is unique.

Although I have distinguished four levels on which the play *Macbeth* can work, I do not want to give the impression that these levels can in fact be separated from each other. The entertainment, the moral teaching, the psychology, and the poetry are often all contained in the same speech—even, sometimes, in the same line. *Macbeth* demands an alert reader.

No summary can do justice to the play. At best, a commentary such as this can be no more than a map. It can show the roads, and even point out the important places; but it is no substitute for reading the play.

Leading characters in the play

- Duncan** The king of Scotland, murdered by Macbeth. Duncan is a true and gracious king, who represents the Elizabethan concept that the king was appointed by God, and is therefore almost divine.
- Malcolm** Duncan's elder son. Early in the play Malcolm is named as the next king of Scotland. After Duncan's murder Malcolm, with his brother Donalbain, escapes from Scotland. He takes refuge in England, at the court of Edward the Confessor, until he is able to lead an army against Macbeth. At the end of the play he is crowned king of Scotland.
- Macbeth** A mighty and ambitious warrior, one of the leaders of Duncan's army. He hears a prophecy that he will be king one day. This makes him more ambitious and leads him to murder Duncan. He is elected king of Scotland, but he becomes a cruel and unjust ruler. He is always conscious of guilt, and never knows a moment's peace after he has killed Duncan. At the end of the play he is killed by Macduff. (See also p. xix.)
- Lady Macbeth** She is even more ambitious than her husband, and has no regard for morality. She urges Macbeth to kill Duncan, and refuses to understand his doubts and hesitations. Husband and wife are at first affectionate, hiding nothing from each other; gradually this relationship is destroyed. Lady Macbeth becomes obsessed with the murder of Duncan, suffers from nightmares, and finally kills herself.
- Banquo** He and Macbeth are the leaders of Duncan's army, but he is not so conspicuously valiant as Macbeth. It is prophesied that his children will be kings, but although he hopes that this prophecy will come true, he takes no action. He is killed by murderers working for Macbeth, but his son, Fleance, escapes.
- Macduff** A Scottish thane (nobleman), who comes to prominence after the murder of Duncan. Macbeth is particularly afraid of him, and orders murderers to kill Lady Macduff and her children. Macduff

persuades Malcolm to lead an army against Macbeth, and it is he who kills Macbeth.

Ross Although Ross has a large part in the play, he does not really have a 'character'. He brings messages, describes events, warns of dangers to come, and comments on the progress of the play.

Macbeth: The play

Act I

- Scene 1 A very short scene opens the play. It is long enough to awaken curiosity, but not to satisfy it. We have come in at the *end* of the witches' meeting, just as they are arranging their next appointment before their 'familiar spirits'—devils in animal shapes—call them away into the 'fog and filthy air'. The mood of the play is set here, although the action does not start until the next scene. Here we
- Scene 2 learn about the tough battle, about the rebels who seem to have all the luck, and about two brave men, Macbeth and Banquo, who win the victory for Scotland. Duncan rewards Macbeth for his courage by giving him the title 'thane of Cawdor'; but we ought to remember that the title first belonged to one who was 'a most disloyal traitor'.
- Scene 3 The witches' malice and magic are shown, as they await Macbeth on the lonely moor (a wasteland area). They have power over the winds, and can make life miserable for such men as the captain of the ship, 'The Tiger'. Their dance, when they hear Macbeth's drum, is made up of steps in groups of three—the magical number. Macbeth and Banquo, however, are ordinary human beings, tired after the day's fighting and grumbling about the weather. Banquo is almost amused by the witches; he cannot bring himself to think of them as women because 'your beards forbid me to interpret/That you are so'. Macbeth is stunned to silence by their prophecies, but Banquo questions them calmly.

The audience can judge the witches better than Macbeth can; *we* know, from the previous scene, that his courage, and not the witches' magic, has won him the title 'thane of Cawdor'; and we are not surprised, as he is, when Ross calls him by this title. While Ross, Angus, and Banquo speak together (perhaps at the back of the stage), Macbeth speaks his own thoughts aloud in a soliloquy—a speech not intended by the speaker to be overheard. They are frightening thoughts: they frighten Macbeth as well as us, for

murder is in his mind. He tries to reject this first impulse, declaring that he will leave everything to chance:

If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me
Without my stir.

Scene 4 When Duncan hears of the death of the treacherous thane of Cawdor, he utters a very meaningful remark:

There's no art
To find the mind's construction in the face.
He was a gentleman on whom I built
An absolute trust.

We have not seen the traitor, so we do not know how appropriate these words are for *him*; but we have seen his successor, and Macbeth is certainly a gentleman on whom Duncan is building 'An absolute trust'. Duncan's comment could also be applied to other persons and happenings in this play, where things are not what they seem to be, where 'Fair is foul and foul is fair'.

Duncan now makes a very important announcement:

We will establish our estate upon
Our eldest, Malcolm, whom we name hereafter
The Prince of Cumberland.

In the time of Duncan the crown of Scotland was not passed automatically from father to son. Instead, the king could name his successor, as Duncan does here, and grant him the title 'Prince of Cumberland'. If the king were to die without naming an heir, or if the heir was not acceptable, the Scottish nobles could elect a new king. We hear that Macbeth is thus elected in *Act 2, Scene 4*. Duncan's choice comes as a great shock to Macbeth, for he recognizes it as an obstacle standing between him and the crown. At the end of the scene he admits to possessing 'black and deep desires', but he is afraid to speak these openly, even to himself.

Scene 5 We already know the contents of Macbeth's letter to his wife; but the letter is important because it shows us something of the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth: he has no secrets from her, and she is his 'dearest partner of greatness'. Lady Macbeth understands her husband well. She knows that he has great ambitions, but she also knows that he is honourable, and that this sense of honour will not allow him to 'catch the nearest way'. She knows that she will have to urge her husband on to become

king, and she calls for evil spirits to help her. She will give up all the gentle, tender qualities of a woman, so that she can become a sexless, pitiless fiend. She takes full control over the situation, and Macbeth seems glad to let her have the responsibility.

Scene 7 Alone after dinner, Macbeth has the opportunity to think about the murder of his king, perhaps for the first time. At first murder had been only a dream, 'but fantastical' (1, 3, 139), but now it is a real moral problem. He knows that the crime must be punished; divine justice in a 'life to come' does not worry him so much as judgement in this earthly life. Then he considers the duties he owes to Duncan—the duties of a kinsman, of a subject to his king, and of a host to his guest. Finally he thinks of the character of Duncan, a king of almost divine excellence.

Macbeth has a vision of the heavenly powers, horrified by this murder; he sees Pity, personified as a 'naked new-born babe' which is nevertheless 'Striding the blast', while 'heaven's cherubin' are mounted on the winds. The speech builds to a mighty climax—then suddenly the power is lost, when Macbeth turns to his own wretched motive for committing such a crime. He can find nothing except 'Vaulting ambition', and even now he realizes that too high a leap ('vault') can only lead to a fall.

His mind is made up, and he tells his wife 'We will proceed no further in this business'. He is not prepared for her rage and abuse. She calls him a coward, insults his virility, and declares that she would have murdered her child while it was feeding at her breast, rather than break such a promise as Macbeth has done. Defeated by his wife's scorn, and persuaded by her encouragement, Macbeth agrees to murder his king.

Act 2

Scene 1 The witches have disturbed Banquo, as well as Macbeth. As he crosses the courtyard of Macbeth's castle he hears a noise, and calls for his sword: this suggests tension, for he should not need a sword in a friend's home. Macbeth also shows signs of stress, for he speaks few words in his replies to Banquo; and when he is alone, the strain shows very clearly. He is living in a nightmare, but although he is at first alarmed by the dagger that his imagination creates, he seems

later to *enjoy* the horror of the moment. The last lines of the scene could even show a grim humour:

the bell invites me.
Hear it not, Duncan; for it is a knell
That summons thee to heaven, or to hell.

Scene 2 Lady Macbeth is as tense as her husband, and she has been drinking to give herself courage. Her speech is jerky, for she reacts to every sound, and when her husband comes from the king's room, his hands red with Duncan's blood, she greets him with relief and pride: 'My husband'. He has now proved himself, in her eyes, to be a man. Macbeth slowly awakens from the nightmare he has been living in and realizes what a terrible crime he has committed. He speaks of the real sounds he has heard, and then of the voice that cried

'Sleep no more!
Macbeth does murder sleep'

This ban will be carried out: never again will Macbeth, or his wife, have any rest, and from time to time throughout the play they will comment on their weariness and lack of refreshing sleep.

For the present, however, Lady Macbeth again takes charge of the situation. Early in this scene she revealed some natural, womanly feelings when she confessed that she could not murder Duncan herself because he 'resembled/My father as he slept'. But now she speaks a line which shows, terrifyingly, how little she thinks of the guilt that she shares with her husband:

A little water clears us of this deed.

Scene 3 The mood of the play suddenly changes. The audience has been as tense as Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in the last scene, and we need to relax a little now. The Porter, woken from a drunken sleep, gives us something to laugh at. His jokes are not so funny today as they were in 1606, when his chatter about the 'equivocator' might have reminded the audience of the recent and notorious trial of a priest who could 'swear in both the scales against either scale'; but the wise observations on drink and lechery are still amusing.

Macduff and Lennox come almost from another world; or perhaps the Porter is more accurate than he thinks when he pretends to be porter at the gate of hell. The tension mounts again as we wait for the murder to be discovered.

Lennox's description of the 'unruly' night would have been full of significance to the Elizabethans. They firmly believed that any disorder in human affairs was reflected by disorder in the world of nature. Macbeth is cautious, but we cannot miss the understatement of his reply to Lennox: 'twas a rough night'.

The moment we have been waiting for arrives. Macduff's words emphasize the fact that this is more than an ordinary murder:

Confusion now has made his masterpiece!
Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope
The Lord's anointed temple.

The scene is chaotic: alarm-bells ring, and characters appear from all sides of the stage. Macduff is almost hysterical; the king's sons are afraid; Macbeth impulsively kills Duncan's servants—and by doing so arouses Macduff's suspicion. The speech in which Macbeth attempts to justify himself may perhaps convince the other thanes; but we know how false it is, and the elaborate images (for example, 'His silver skin lac'd with his golden blood') stress this falsehood. Lady Macbeth knows the truth too, for she faints (or pretends to faint) and some attention is drawn away from her husband.

Scene 4 The short scene between Ross and the Old Man serves three purposes. At first it continues the comparison begun in Lennox's lines in Scene 3 between the human world and the natural world, mentioning strange events and stressing that they are

unnatural,
Even like the deed that's done.

The second function of the scene appears when Macduff enters to bring more news: it indicates the passing of time. Thirdly, it brings Macduff into greater prominence, because it allows the actor playing the part of Macduff to reveal, by the tone of his voice, that Macduff continues to be suspicious of Macbeth, and that he does not himself believe the answers he gives to Ross's questions.

Act 3

Scene 1 Banquo also is suspicious of Macbeth:

Thou hast it now: King, Cawdor, Glamis, all,
As the weird women promis'd; and, I fear,
Thou play'st most foully for 't.

But he thinks about the prophecy concerning his own children, and this gives him hope. Macbeth too has been thinking about this prophecy, and it gives him cause for bitterness: he realizes that his crown is 'fruitless', and his sceptre 'barren' (see illustration, p. 65). He murdered Duncan in order to make the witches' prophecy come true, but now he plots to murder Banquo and Fleance so that the witches' promise to Banquo may *not* come true.

Scene 2 Lady Macbeth now begins to show signs of strain, and we hear that Macbeth suffers 'terrible dreams'. For a moment Macbeth and his wife show understanding and sympathy for each other, but the moment does not last long. Macbeth keeps secret from his wife the plot to murder Banquo. He alarms her by conjuring up an atmosphere of evil, and once again he appears to enjoy his dreadful imaginings (just as he did when he went to murder Duncan). But it is a mistake to hide the facts from Lady Macbeth: this is the beginning of the break in their relationship.

When Macbeth calls upon 'seeling night' to hide his wickedness, we remember how Lady Macbeth, before the murder of Duncan, had called for the night, shrouded in 'the dunnest smoke of hell' (1, 5, 50), to hide the murdering dagger from the sight of heaven.

Scene 3 Outside the castle, the two murderers wait for Banquo and Fleance. It is a surprise, to us as well as to them, when a third hired assassin appears. Macbeth can trust no-one, not even the thugs he first appointed to murder Banquo.

Scene 4 The confusion of Banquo's murder contrasts well with the ceremony of the state banquet. The formality is announced in the first line: 'You know your own degrees; sit down'; and the scene proceeds with dignity for some time. The appearance of one of Banquo's murderers disturbs the peace for Macbeth. The state occasion demands courteous behaviour from the king, but when the murderer says that Fleance has escaped, Macbeth is agitated. Banquo's Ghost, which only Macbeth can see, adds to this distress, until the whole scene breaks into fragments, and Lady Macbeth

has to ask her guests to leave, without any of the formality with which they arrived:

Stand not upon the order of your going,
But go at once.

The banquet is symbolic as well as realistic, and Shakespeare is careful that we do not overlook this aspect. As soon as the guests are seated, Macbeth promises to 'drink a measure / The table round'. In many societies and religions, the sharing of a cup of wine, sometimes even called a 'loving-cup', symbolizes unity and fellowship; and so it is intended here. When Macbeth has stepped away from the table to speak to the murderer, Lady Macbeth calls him back, and reminds him of his duty as a host, adding that on such an occasion 'the sauce to meat is ceremony'. Macbeth brings chaos to Scotland, breaking up the harmony of a well-ordered country, just as he breaks up the state banquet 'With most admir'd disorder'.

Scene 5 It is a pity that this silly little scene has to be included in *Macbeth*. Shakespeare never wrote like this, and it was probably inserted into the play by some over-enthusiastic actor, who saw that the audiences enjoyed the witches' scenes, and decided to give them another. Or perhaps it is the work of an actor who found he had no part in the play, and so created the character of Hecate for himself, writing these lines, and five more in *Act 4, Scene 1* (39-43). This person must also, I think, take the responsibility for the placing of Scene 6. This would be more appropriate coming *after* the visit to the witches, which should follow immediately after the banquet scene: Macbeth said then that he would call upon the witches 'tomorrow—And betimes I will', and he would not have postponed such an important errand.

Scene 6 Suspicion of Macbeth is growing. Lennox speaks here not as himself, an individual character, but with what we now call 'the voice of the people'. His words are innocent in meaning, but the exaggeration of tone directs the actor to make his speech heavily sarcastic—as, for example, in these lines:

How it did grieve Macbeth! did he not straight
In pious rage the two delinquents tear,
That were the slaves of drink and thralls of sleep?

The unnamed Lord gives us information about Malcolm, and also makes the first reference in the play to the king of England, 'the most pious Edward', who is the complete opposite of Macbeth. The comparison will be developed in a later scene.

Act 4

Scene 1 We now see Macbeth receiving comfort from the three Apparitions that the witches call up. They appear in symbolic form. The first, 'an armed head', represents Macbeth's own head (wearing a helmet), as it is cut off and brought to Malcolm in *Act 5*, Scene 7. The 'bloody child' that comes next is Macduff, who had been 'untimely ripp'd' from his mother's womb (as he tells Macbeth in *Act 5*, Scene 7). And the last, the royal child with a tree in his hand, is Malcolm, the rightful king of Scotland, who approaches the palace at Dunsinane camouflaged with tree-branches (*Act 5*, Scene 4). Macbeth cannot interpret these symbols, but Shakespeare expects the audience to understand what is meant. This is 'dramatic irony'—when the truth of a situation is known to the audience but hidden from the characters in the play. There is dramatic irony, too, in the words spoken by the Apparitions, for again we understand the real meanings, while Macbeth can only understand the apparent meanings of the words. Macbeth, however, is in no doubt about the significance of the final 'show of Eight Kings'.

Scene 2 This pathetic scene in which Lady Macduff and her son are massacred shows us Macbeth's cruelty in action. When he plotted to kill Banquo's son, Fleance, he could justify the crime to himself by referring to the prophecy that Banquo's children should be kings. But he is in no danger from Lady Macduff or from her son; the crime is more dreadful because it is motiveless. Our knowledge of it helps us to find more dramatic irony in the scene that follows,

Scene 3 when Malcolm mistrusts Macduff chiefly because he cannot understand

Why in that rawness left you wife and child—

Those precious motives, those strong knots of love—

Without leave-taking?

Macduff must prove his loyalty to Malcolm and to Scotland; then Malcolm must prove that he is worthy to be king. Again we are told of Edward the Confessor, and this time we hear of his divine gift of healing. This characteristic was not chosen by chance. Shakespeare uses many images of sickness; just a little later in this scene, he describes Scotland as a place where

good men's lives

Expire before the flowers in their caps,

Dying or ere they sicken.

In Act 5 Scene 2 Caithness recognizes Malcolm as the doctor who can cure Scotland's sickness, calling him 'the medicine of the sickly weal' (line 27).

We respond intellectually to this account of the English king, and to the concept of the monarch as some kind of physician, divinely appointed to safeguard the country's health. We respond emotionally to the next episode in this long scene as Ross breaks the bad news to Macduff. We feel the painful irony of Ross's evasive answer: 'they were well at peace when I did leave 'em'. If we had not seen Lady Macduff and her son, we should not be distressed; because of scene 2, we are able to share Macduff's own grief. I am always moved by Macduff's answer to Malcolm, who urges him to

Dispute it like a man.

Macduff replies with dignity

I shall do so;
But I must also feel it like a man.

The word 'man' is being used in two senses. Malcolm intends it to mean 'bravely', but Macduff is thinking of a man as a human being, with tender emotions of love and grief, which must not be denied.

Act 5

Scene 1 The very next scene shows what happens when human emotions are denied. At the beginning of the play Lady Macbeth prayed that she should know 'no compunctious visitings of nature' (1, 5, 44) that might prevent her from murdering Duncan. Now she walks in her sleep, and her mind constantly re-lives the night of the murder. On that night she declared confidently that 'A little water clears us of this deed' (2, 2, 67), but now she knows that 'all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand'. It is the last time we see Lady Macbeth. Although the Doctor warns her lady-in-waiting to 'Remove from her the means of all annoyance', we learn later that 'by self and violent hands', she killed herself (5, 7, 99).

Scene 2 From now until the end of the play the action moves between the two armies—Malcolm's soldiers, steadily drawing closer to Dunsinane, and Macbeth's forces, besieged near the castle. Caithness and Angus discuss the strength of the enemy, and Angus offers a shrewd comment on Macbeth:

Now does he feel his title
Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe
Upon a dwarfish thief.

This is not the first image of badly-fitting clothes. When Macbeth was given the title 'thane of Cawdor', soon after the witches had prophesied that it would be given to him, he stood apart from Banquo and the king's messengers; then Banquo laughed, and explained that Macbeth was like a man with new clothes:

New honours come upon him,
Like our strange garments, cleave not to their mould
But with the aid of use. (1, 3, 144-6)

Macbeth himself thought of the praises he had earned for his courage in terms of fine clothes,

Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,
Not cast aside so soon. (1, 7, 34-5)

There are many such allusions throughout the play. They make us stop and think about the relationship between Macbeth and the honours he is 'wearing'. Has he won them, or stolen them? Will his 'clothes' fit, in time—or will they always be too big for him?

Scene 3 When he has heard the Doctor's medical opinion of his wife, Macbeth asks, with his grim humour, for a medical opinion on the state of the country. The Doctor is allowed the same humour when he closes the scene:

Were I from Dunsinane away and clear,
Profit again should hardly draw me here.

The situation is now so serious that only a sour joke (playing on the Elizabethan belief in the doctor's greed for gold) can ease the tension.