

MACBETH

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Story The story of *Macbeth* is set in mediaeval Scotland, and involves conflict on the highest power level—as in *Hamlet*. Like Hamlet, also, Macbeth announces himself from the outset by an ominous conflict with the supernatural—the ghost in *Hamlet*, in *Macbeth* the witches—a supernatural which prophesies dangerous waters ahead.

The dangerous waters for Macbeth are the ambition in which he will eventually drown and die, having failed in his attempt to become King of Scotland. Like Hamlet, Macbeth dies in struggle through the bite of a sword. His downfall has been predicted by witches, at the beginning of the play.

Macbeth's tragedy begins with his own relative ambition, cruelly stoked by the evil power drive of Lady Macbeth, who goads her husband on to consider murdering the King, Duncan, who coincidentally has just arrived in Macbeth's castle. Macbeth—who has something of Hamlet in him—is hesitant about committing an act as sacrilegious as murder, yet his remorseless wife drives him on, and aids him in the action. During the evening of revelry, which King Macduff spends in Macbeth's castle, Lady Macbeth takes the initiative. She sees to it that the guards of the King's bedchamber are drugged, so that Macbeth can safely enter the chamber and kill his liege lord. From this point on, the rather confused Macbeth, and the steel hard Lady Macbeth, are in a vortex leading to disaster.

The 'discovery' of the body of the king sends a wild alarm through the kingdom and Macbeth joins the general manhunt. Macbeth is appointed new king of Scotland, and the old king's two sons flee to England. Macbeth does his best to deal with his new situation, but is slowly going crazy with pressure, and with the haranguing by his wife. He arranges for the murder of his military lieutenant Banquo, hoping to evade the witches' prophecy, that Macbeth's line would be cut short by Banquo. Just then, however, the ghost of Banquo appears; Macbeth is terrified, while his wife attempts to inspire him with backbone. The next day Macbeth returns to the witches again, but is informed by even further prophecies that his end is coming. He will rule strongly until the time when 'Burnham wood to Dunsinane shall come,' the endgame understood to none at that point.

When Macbeth learns that the King's influential follower, Macduff, has deserted him, he finds it necessary to have Macduff and his family wiped out. By this point, the opposition is fully formed, and Malcolm, the former king's son, forms an army—in foliage disguise they will be the ones who come from Burgham Wood to Dunsinane—and the end is effectively upon Macbeth, who is killed in combat by Macduff. There remains no narrative to tell, except for the wonderful dramaturgy of the increasing madness of Lady Macbeth, who as the play declares its inexorable conclusion, grows deeper and deeper into a madness of her own, as she realizes the overwhelming consequences of her actions. Haunted by the blood that she has caused to be spilled, Lady Macbeth becomes a symbol of the whole tragedy of Shakespeare's play. While she struggles to expunge the bloodstains on her hands, Macbeth himself gradually becomes aware of the accuracy of all the predictions of the witches. As in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the deformities of power are here too probed to the core, and the tireless march of historical revenge wins out.

Characters

Macbeth himself is an ambitious aristocrat, who is willing to slay his King, who is spending the night in Macbeth's castle. However Macbeth carries out such violence only because his wife demands it. He is in reality a henpecked aristocrat, dangerous to himself and others.

Lady Macbeth is the daring and extremely ambitious wife of Macbeth, who prods him to undertake murderous deeds. In the final act, though, she proves to be a hag ridden and neurotic killer, who cannot come to grips with what she has caused.

Themes

The devastating consequences of **ambition**. Not only is Macbeth killed, and Lady Macbeth driven insane, but any number of collateral contestants die in the struggle around the throne of Scotland. We must draw the conclusion that the initial desire for power spread out widely through many lives, and was the root of the problem. Don't go there!

Bad conscience. Macbeth is a coward, who is haunted by the fear of the results of the deeds he has done, while his wife is up for anything, if it enhances her power. Unfortunately she suffers frightfully from bad conscience and personal anxiety after she has performed vile deeds.

Prophecies are worth listening to. Macbeth first ignores the witches, but In the course of time realizes that they spoke truth about the fate that lay before him.