

MACBETH

Shakespeare

Overview Written in 1606, for performance before the Royal Court, *Macbeth* remains one of Shakespeare's greatest plays. Like *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, *Macbeth* reaches deeply into male emotional weakness: three noble and privileged royals surrounded with life challenges largely of their own making, and barely strong enough to meet the extreme situations they permit to down them. Macbeth shares the weakness of the other two powerful figures, but like them is weighed down by a fate which seizes him from the beginning and defines him as tragic.

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.

Themes

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!

Guilt 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 Prophecies turn out to be 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.

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.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

MACBETH (Emotional)

Character Macbeth himself is ambitious for power, the kingdom of Scotland, and unable—thanks to the prodding of his Lady Wife—to resist the temptation of killing the current King, and replacing him in a royal coup. Driven emotionally to this murder, and to a subsequent second murder, to consolidate his power, Macbeth begins—like Orestes in the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus—to feel himself fate-doomed and unable to escape. He has up to now been geared to action, but finding his wife's spirit broken by anxiety and remorse, Macbeth too crumbles emotionally, and in the end, at the news of wife's death, declares life a meaningless 'brief candle.'

Parallels The male reliant on the executive power of his wife is a well trodden theme in western literature and culture of the last century, in which female prominence in society—political, economic, sexual—has been given a rich voice. The movie *Mr. Mom* (1983) and the novel *The World According to Garp* (John Irving, 1975) characterize a couple of facets of the new dethronement of the male household boss. Any number of major fictions probe the existential-social dilemmas of the guy caught between his traditional control job and dependence on what is outside him: *Under the Volcano* (1947) is Malcolm Lowry's exploration of a disintegrating but passionate alcoholic consul, for whom life becomes too painful; *The Heart of the Matter*—Graham Greene, 1948—for whom marital indecision and lust lead a long downward path into suicide; *The Death of a Salesman*—Arthur Miller, 1949—excavates the broken and hollow life of the male reduced to huckstering.

Illustrative moments

Imaginative Imaginative and speculative, Macbeth allows his ambition for kingship to grow in him. He has just proven his power as a successful general, in battle against the Norwegians, and is considering the tempting possibility of doing away with the current King, Duncan. His thought of murdering the king is still just 'fantastical,' part of 'horrible imaginings,' and yet Macbeth has already taken fatal steps, in his mind, toward what will be calamitous action. Macbeth, like Hamlet, is emotionally involved with the plans and hopes he keeps hidden in his mind.

Uncertain Having written to his wife about forecasts for his own ascension to Kingship, and having thus awakened power ambitions in Lady Macbeth, as well, Macbeth begins to calculate the psychology of regicide. 'If it were done when tis done, then twere well it were done quickly.' Thoughtful and self-

reflective, like Hamlet, Macbeth needs inner reassurance that he will be able to carry through the act that is brewing inside him. However the more he reflects on the act of regicide, the more his emotions take control of him; he becomes aware of the actual nobility of the King, who is his guest at this point, and whose soul will damn Macbeth, from heaven.

Introspective Macbeth inspects a dagger, a fearful tool, the vehicle of his murderous ambition, and yet he asks: 'art thou but a dagger of the mind, a false creation, proceeding from the heat-oppressed mind?' Macbeth had, in a sense, already committed murder, for in his mind he is obsessed with the consequences of the deed which, under the hasty evil approval of his wife, he is prepared to commit. After he has committed the actual murder, Macbeth and his wife will begin to realize the consequences of their action. Macbeth looks at his hands, dreadful witnesses from which he will never be able to cleanse himself.

Remorseful Macbeth, having carried out the murder of Duncan, begins to reflect that he has also murdered sleep. When his wife responds that this thinking, on Macbeth's part, is 'brainsickly,' emotionally wild, and adds that he should wash his hands clean of stain, Macbeth replies that his hand will rather 'the multitudinous seas incarnadine,' stain the universe with blood of the present murder. A knocking is heard at the castle door, and Macbeth wishes, already, that it might be someone capable of waking the ex-King Duncan. So ready is Macbeth, already, to be where he was before he committed the murder.

Discussion questions

Is Macbeth confident and strong at the beginning of the play. Has he in him the power to kill and replace the king? Or is he from the start an emotional pawn of his wife?

Does the 'witch element' in the play represent the suppressed terror and passion of Macbeth and his wife?

Is Macbeth simply a coward, or is he conscientious enough to tremble at the fearful act of regicide which his wife is driving him to?

LADY MACBETH (Unconscientious)

Character Lady Macbeth is the risk-taking ambitious wife of Macbeth, a general of the army of Scotland. She is eager to do what she must to advance her husband to the position of supreme power in Scotland, and spurs him—for this purpose—to the murder of Duncan, King of Scotland, who has come to visit Macbeth's castle. This brutal deed, which she more than her husband has conceived, will soon haunt both her husband and her, and drive them both to a rapid death, which of course wipes away any of the benefits the couple hoped to acquire by regicide.

Parallels Lady Macbeth is ambitious and ruthless, for her man's ascent, but of course for her own power too. Many parallels simply nibble at her complexity. The Wife of Bath, in the *Canterbury Tales* (14th century) is a no holds barred feminist before her time, who insists on her rights to social power as well as to the bed. Jane Eyre, in the novel of 1847 by Charlotte Bronte, is a woman of conscience, unlike Lady Macbeth, but shares with Lady Macbeth a clearly unfolding and passionate female inner life, which is vividly tracked. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) depicts the growth in passion and independence of a woman determined to have her way at all costs—and for whom her husband is only a stepping stone. Any of the major figures of Feminism—Betty Friedan (*The Feminine Mystique*, 1963) or Germaine Greer (*The Female Eunuch*, 1970)—provides a framework for seeing Lady Macbeth from the inside, scheming and ruthless, but sure in her sex' power.

Illustrative moments

Ambitious Lady Macbeth first appears to us reading a letter from her husband, in which he reports to her the encounter he has had with three witches on the heath, at the outset of the play. The witches have used wild sibylline words to imply that Macbeth is in line for the throne of Scotland, and Lady Macbeth reads the message with intense interest. She believes that her husband will become King, though she does not yet have a plan that will lead to the throne. She is clearly ready for any path that will lead her and her husband to this level of grandeur. Her conscience has no power at all over her behavior.

Shrewd Immediately after reading Macbeth's message, his wife reflects on what she fears most, that her husband would not be 'strong' enough to carry through on his desire for supreme power. 'Yet do I fear thy nature,' she muses, thinking of him; 'it is too full of the milk of human kindness to catch the nearest way.' He is, she goes on to think, sufficiently ambitious, but wants power without the 'illness,' that is wickedness, which must attend it. She suspects her husband would ultimately be turned off by what he would need to do to succeed; she is shrewd and planning, **unconscientious** and ready to act, but she turns out to be limited in her own insight.

Scheming Lady Macbeth, still in the rich introductory lines, decides what path she must take to drive her husband further, into the rough patches of their mutual ambition. 'Hie thee hither,' she says to herself—and to her husband, that 'I may pour my spirits in thine ear,' and lead you forward in your quest for the 'golden round,' the crown. She goes on, in her unconscientious mind, to make much of the seeming predictions laid out by the witches on the heath, and to rest her conviction on the 'metaphysical'—that is supernatural—aid that appears to be promised to her and her mate.

Scheming When Macbeth returns to his castle--after he has tendered an invitation to the King—Lady Macbeth meets him with the advice that he should look innocent and welcoming, when the king arrives. 'Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it.' 'Leave all the rest to me,' she says, as she goes to prepare her role in the reception of the King. No sooner has the King dined, and asked to see Macbeth, than Lady Macbeth confronts her husband with the charge that he is avoiding the King. Hearing from her husband that he is reconsidering their murderous plan, Lady Macbeth grows contemptuous and sarcastic. She finds her husband's conscience ridiculous.

Discussion questions

Does Lady Macbeth feel any remorse for her lack of conscience, in carrying out her ambitious plan for her husband?

What destroys Lady Macbeth, by the end of the play? Is it her tortured conscience?

Why is Lady Macbeth so ambitious? Is it for herself? For her husband? Or simply to acquire power?