

**Title:** Macbeth: Overview  
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No literary work is more wreathed in superstition than *Macbeth*. Notoriously, actors avoid naming it, employing instead cautious circumlocutions such as "the Scottish Play." Within the text itself Macbeth acquires a similar status: "This Tyrant, whose sole name blisters our tongues." The reasons for this are obvious. *Macbeth* includes invocations of evil spirits, apparitions from the underworld, and the working of black magic on stage. In *As You Like It* Hymen appears to consecrate marriage, and Zeus appears in *The Tempest*. Both figures reflect the spirit of the plays which they enter. *Macbeth* is entered by Hecate, goddess of witchcraft. The protagonist is so evil that he must not merely be killed, but destroyed: in the final scene his head is brought on stage. In literary, rather than theatrical terms, the play is a study in evil, fate, and the supernatural.

The central paradox (in a play which communicates truths through paradox) is that while Macbeth becomes a murderer and tyrant, he remains the hero. His heroic status has two causes. First, the narrative of *Macbeth* takes its tragic hero far past the point (if such a point exists) where he has triumphed through his sin. Macbeth's triumph is a hollow one, troubled by constant insecurity. He does not enjoy the fruits of kingship. His crime leads him only into a perpetual struggle with the forces of chaos and with the shapes of his own disturbed mind. Yet when all is lost Macbeth fights on, his courage adding a pathos to his confrontation with death and damnation.

Second, Macbeth is involved in a superhuman battle against forces that are more or less than mortal. In this conflict he must engage some at least of the audience's sympathy, for his opponent is the common enemy of man. All mankind is represented in Macbeth: his story marks out a Faustian path which is timeless—the destruction which falls on those who are beguiled by satanic promises. In our recognition of this, Macbeth, of all tragic heroes, arouses (according to Aristotle's dictum) not only pity, but fear. At stake is our belief in the beneficence of the universe. The plot of *Macbeth* is true to the world of Greek tragedy in its presentation of the world as a dangerous place governed by a malign fate.

To sustain the central paradox—the heroic murderer—is difficult. The play accomplishes it by a number of means. First, the action distances Macbeth from his atrocities. We see Macbeth kill only one man, and that is in battle at the end of the play. Second, Macbeth is introduced to us as the hero of his generation, whose bloody ruthlessness marks the epitome of honour. Through it he has saved the Kingdom for a King who is himself too old to take to the field. His heroic slaughter in battle is, significantly, compared to the crucifixion: "Another Golgotha." In launching on his new path as traitor and despot he exercises the same bloody determination which distinguishes him in the warrior society depicted in the play. Third, Shakespeare seems deliberately to undermine the moral or dramatic stature of all who oppose Macbeth. Dramatically, Macduff should be the hero, but dramatically he is weakened by his incautious neglect of his family. He is further reduced in our eyes at the moment when Macbeth, believing himself to be invulnerable, offers Macduff mercy. Malcolm is the other potential hero. Yet the crucial scene (IV.iii) in which Malcolm reveals his character to the audience is confusing. The bulk of Malcolm's lines are spent in lengthy condemnation of his own monstrous vices, culminating in the declaration that he is worse than Macbeth himself. Then, in a brief 12 lines he reverses his original speech by announcing himself to be of pure and virginal virtue. In a world of deception and obscurity he has hardly proved a touchstone of integrity. Furthermore, in what is a short text, none of the other characters are allowed enough room to develop into satisfying heroes. Banquo is an obvious choice for hero, as he may have the strength to resist the temptations to which Macbeth has yielded (though his dreams are troubled). However Banquo is an early victim and speaks no more after the third act. Fourth, in literary terms Macbeth is pre-eminent. The sensitivity of his imagination is matched by a poetic eloquence which maintains our fascination with him. The vividness of his soliloquies is compelling. His speech of V.v., "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow," is an anthem of bitter despair which strikes a chord with all our feelings of the futility of life.

*Macbeth* is one of the most explicit of Shakespeare's works in dealing with the spiritual realms. The play presents both the power of Christianity and the forces raised by black witchcraft. These forces assume a particularly British identity. The witches themselves are emanations of the earth. Evil is made manifest through elements of the natural world: the bat, the wolf, the rook. *Macbeth* depicts a conflict fought both above and below. It brings the occult dimensions uncomfortably close. The cosmology referred to by Lady Macbeth assumes the continual presence of listening spirits of evil, waiting to be invoked. The invisible world presses in close around the corporeal:

Come, you spirits  
 That tend on mortal thoughts ...

Come to my woman's breasts  
 And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers  
 Wherever, in your sightless, substances,  
 You wait on nature's mischief.

At the heart of the spiritual battle is the murder of Duncan. This is conceived not in criminal terms, but in religious ones, as an act of sacrilege: "Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope/The Lord's anointed temple and stole thence/The Life o'the building." Once again, there are echoes of the crucifixion (the Lord's anointed). Duncan's body, like that of Christ, is the temple of God. After his murder, as after the crucifixion, the sun is eclipsed. This supernatural violation has a devastating effect on the natural order. Macbeth's description: "And his gashed stabs looked like a breach in nature/For ruins wasteful entrance" proves prophetic. The breaches of Duncan's wounds are rents in the natural order through which darkness and confusion pour, covering the land. Scotland is overwhelmed by the darkness that the Queen invoked. She herself is left spiritually injured, as the Doctor informs us, needing "light by her continually." Waves of darkness and terror flood the land till Scotland itself "bleeds." Banquo, Macduff's family, and countless others are engulfed. Yet at their furthest reach these waves ebb back, and close in contracting circles around Macbeth. Nature pushes in to heal the breach, marching visibly across the stage against him. Finally Macbeth is left alone, encircled, and awaiting death.

The spiritual dimension to this countermovement is acknowledged by Macbeth's opponents: "Macbeth/Is ripe for shaking, and the powers above/Put on their instruments." It is most powerfully demonstrated in the person of Edward, who appears at the point where the dramatic tide turns. The structure as well as the themes of the play balance him against Macbeth. Edward is no warrior King, however, but an angelic figure blessed with the charismatic gifts of the holy spirit. Above and below there is polarisation. The king of Scotland is in league with dark powers, while the English king is a saintlike servant of God.

More than any other of Shakespeare's tragedies *Macbeth* can be read as an extended poem. The text of the play is characterised by an extraordinary density of image, meaning, and symbol. Threads of imagery run through the play, first appearing in words, then brought to life on stage. There is an almost musical exploration and reworking of images and motifs: darkness, Hell, daggers, blood, feasting, drinking, dress, sleep, medicine, and motherhood. The effect of this symphonic orchestration of images is peculiarly atmospheric. The text of the play creates a fertile imaginative space in which words and thoughts gather energy to themselves and become real. Many of these images are drawn from nature.

Birds, traditional symbols of the soul and of the spiritual realm, appear frequently. Banquo's identification of the martin with sanctity proves fatally ironic. Lady Macbeth's preparation for her guests is signalled by a dark ornithomancy of her own: "The raven himself is hoarse/That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan/Under my battlements." Rooks, crows, and ravens, all associated with magic, appear as symbols of grim portent. Macbeth himself is a "hell-kite." The most significant of these images is the owl, sacred to Hecate. The owl first utters its cry as Duncan is murdered. After the murder, the disorder in nature is symbolised by the slaying of a falcon, a royal bird, by an owl. Lady Macduff presages her own murder in her image of the owl falling on the wren.

What we could call the "magical" quality of language—its apparent capacity to bring to pass what has existence in words—is most evident in the words of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Lady Macbeth's rebuke "Was the hope drunk/Wherein you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since?" for example, connects with a web of details surrounding the murder. She will make the grooms drunk to commit the murder, while she herself will need wine to fortify her spirits. Macbeth will dress himself in his nightgown—the garb of sleep—to pretend innocence.

Two of Macbeth's own most powerful speeches come as he prepares for the murders of Duncan and Banquo (II.i. 49-60 and III.ii. 40-55). As the idea of the murders grow he unleashes a stream of incantatory imagery. It is in these speeches that he draws closest to the supernatural evil aroused by the witches (only at these times does he speak the name of Hecate). Part of what gives these speeches their uncanny power is that he does not seem to be in control of them. His imagination opens to a sequence of images—the pale moon, the wolf, the rooky wood—which appear almost to be speaking *through* him.

The relationship of the witches to language is of particular interest. When Macbeth asks, of the witches' ritual, "what is't you do?" their answer, "A deed without a name," is significant. The deed they are working belongs to the other, "sightless" world: mortal language cannot grasp it. No name exists in this domain for the acts of the world beyond. Macbeth has strayed not only beyond the writ of law, but beyond the scope of the lexicon to where language itself fails.

When that world manifests itself in this one, the language it adopts is baffling. It proffers rich promises, but holds in them the seeds of their own negation. (Banquo is indeed "happier" than King Macbeth, but that is saying little.) As the witches themselves cross the border of the visible and the natural, even of the possible, so their words bridge the gap between the present and the future. The prophecies of the witches reach into the occluded realms beyond the horizon of human comprehension. From these realms come the twists of fate that reverse the meaning of the symbols Macbeth believes he understands. Truth from the underworld is always ambiguous. The witches speak to Macbeth in paradoxes and riddles. The supernatural expresses itself in mortal language by the assertion of opposites, "Fair is foul and foul is fair." The use of this antithetical language is one of the signs of emergent evil. As Macbeth contemplates Duncan's murder he is drawn into the imaginative shadow-land where he thinks the unthinkable, "Nothing is but what is not." Even Macduff, troubled by Malcolm's deception, speaks in oxymoron: "Such welcome and unwelcome things at once/'Tis hard to reconcile." The riddling of the witches, while fatal to those who trust in it, is not conventionally malign. In his final confrontation with the witches it is Macbeth who

pronounces five curses, the last one falling on himself, "And damned all those that trust them." His curse is fulfilled.

*Macbeth* fits into wider patterns of tragedy. The essential tragic concept of *hamartia*—the mistake with far reaching consequences—is magnified by recourse to the supernatural. So, too, is the theme of the ruinous effects of the corruption of women—the theme which runs through all Shakespeare's tragedies.

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