

A Guide to MACBETH

by William Shakespeare



Alistair McCallum

“The Shakespeare Handbooks open the plays up admirably. Excellent for all levels of reader – everybody will get something from them.” Simon Callow

The Shakespeare Handbooks

Guides available now:

- Antony & Cleopatra
- As You Like It
- Hamlet
- Henry IV, Part 1
- King Lear
- Macbeth
- A Midsummer Night's Dream
- Romeo & Juliet
- The Tempest
- Twelfth Night

Further titles in preparation.

Setting the scene

Macbeth was probably written between 1603 and 1606. Shakespeare was about forty, and a leading member of England's most successful theatre company, the King's Men. The company's patron was King James I, who had just come to the throne, and who was both notoriously free-spending and a great lover of shows of all kinds.

A number of the new king's interests and beliefs – in the area of witchcraft, for example – are reflected in the play, and it was performed before the king on at least one occasion. In fact it is possible that the *Macbeth* known to us is an abridged version, specially prepared for the royal performance; the king is known to have liked his plays short. There has been much scholarly speculation about 'missing' scenes and events.

Regardless of the circumstances of its creation, the fact remains that *Macbeth* is a gripping, fast-moving, tightly-constructed drama, with a compelling, nightmarish quality that has consistently enthralled audiences through the ages. For a while, during the late 17th and early 18th centuries, songs, dances and special effects were included, and the language softened and refined: however, by the 1850s Shakespeare's dark, savage masterpiece had reasserted itself in its original form.

Macbeth has a unique reputation for bad luck, and many deaths, injuries, misfortunes and bizarre accidents have been associated with productions of the play. Superstition apart, it is certainly true that the play focuses our minds on the human capacity for evil, for choosing to act in ways which we know to be wrong; and this awareness is made so intense and terrifying in *Macbeth* that it can spread, at times, beyond the world of the play and the confines of the theatre:

"Macbeth, which contains some of Shakespeare's greatest poetry, offers one of literature's most striking accounts of an individual soul's descent into the darkness of evil, and its resulting isolation from society. Macbeth's rejection of morality, and its consequences – the loss of his soul and the disruption of the society that he influences – horrifies us. This is a drama that is as terrifying as the plots and wars of real usurpers and kings."

Charles Boyce, *Shakespeare A to Z*

Scotland in danger

The Kingdom of Scotland has been thrown into turmoil by a sudden, violent revolt. Its leader is the ambitious Macdonwald, whose aim is to defeat the army of Duncan, King of Scotland, and seize the crown by force.

Macdonwald is advancing steadily from his stronghold in the west. The conflict between the rebel forces and the King's troops is desperate and bloody. In the thick of the fighting are King Duncan's principal generals, the two noblemen Banquo and Macbeth.

Meanwhile, Sweno, King of Norway, is ready to take advantage of the disorder and invade Scotland from the east.

Curtain up

A meeting is planned

I, i

As the battle rages, three witches meet on a stormy, deserted plain. In the midst of the thunder, rain and swirling fog, they make their plan: when the battle is over – which, they foresee, will be before the end of the day – they will come together once more, near the battlefield, to meet Macbeth.

Their intentions towards Macbeth are as yet obscure, but their enigmatic words do not bode well:

Witches: Fair is foul, and foul is fair:
Hover through the fog and filthy air.

News arrives from the battlefield

I, ii

At his military headquarters, King Duncan is waiting anxiously for news of the battle against Macdonwald and his rebel army. With Duncan are his two sons, Malcolm and Donalbain.

One of Duncan's captains comes into the camp. He has come straight from the battlefield, and is bleeding heavily from his wounds. Malcolm recognises him as the man who earlier saved him from capture by the enemy, and asks him about the latest state of the conflict.

The captain reports that, at one point, the two exhausted armies had reached a deadlock:

Captain: Doubtful it stood;
As two spent¹ swimmers, that do cling together
And choke their art.²

¹ *fatigued*

² *make it impossible for either to carry on*

If anything, luck seemed to be on the side of the rebels. However, Macbeth's intervention brought the battle to a swift, bloody conclusion:

Captain: ... For brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name),
Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish'd steel,
Which smok'd with bloody execution,
Like Valour's minion,¹ carv'd out his passage,
Till he fac'd the slave;²
Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseam'd him from the nave to th'chops,³
And fix'd his head upon our battlements.

¹ *favourite, protégé*

² *Macdonwald, leader of the rebels*

³ *cut him open, from the navel to the jaws*

Their leader dead, the rebels broke up and retreated. However, no sooner had the battle been won than another threat to the Kingdom suddenly arose: Sweno, King of Norway, sent an invading force into Scotland, hoping to win an easy victory over Duncan's battle-weary troops.

The captain reports that Banquo and Macbeth, when last seen, were engaged in fierce fighting against this new onslaught. The captain is by now fainting from his wounds: Duncan orders his attendants to help the man away to be treated by the surgeon.

*"The account given by the wounded
Captain of Macbeth's conquest of the
rebels ... is like a smear of blood
across the first page of the play."*

Harold C. Goddard, *The Meaning
of Shakespeare*, 1951

“Macbeth is compact, a perfectly rounded piece. It tells a strong story at great speed and takes the audience on a roller-coaster of excitement. You can see it a hundred times and it will still appear fresh. It is visually superb, which made me wonder what Shakespeare would have given us had Hollywood existed in his time. The play is beautifully paced for the leading actor ...”

Laurence Olivier, *On Acting*, 1986

Scotland is saved

Ross and Angus, two noblemen, arrive at the camp with more news for Duncan. They confirm that a massive army has invaded from Norway. King Sweno himself has landed on Scottish soil: and it emerges that one of Duncan’s own Thanes – noblemen granted land and power by the King – has assisted the Norwegian King in his bid to conquer Scotland.

Against all the odds, Macbeth, always in the thick of the fighting himself, has led the Scottish army to victory. Sweno has surrendered, and has been forced to pay a heavy ransom to retrieve the bodies of his slain soldiers for burial. The Thane of Cawdor, who had collaborated with Sweno, has been captured.

King Duncan is overjoyed that the threats to Scotland’s security are over. He announces that the disloyal Thane of Cawdor must die; his title will be bestowed on the victorious Macbeth.

The witches demonstrate their power I, iii

The three witches have gathered, as planned, to meet Macbeth. A storm rages around them as they wait on a rough, wild heath.

One of the witches tells her sisters what has happened since their last gathering. A sea-captain's wife has offended her, and she is planning to make the captain suffer in return. His journey to the Mediterranean will become a nightmare of sleeplessness and hunger, and bad weather will keep him from his destination for months:

1st Witch: I'll drain him dry as hay:
Sleep shall neither night nor day
Hang upon his penthouse lid;¹
He shall live a man forbid.
Weary sev'n-nights nine times nine,
Shall he dwindle, peak,² and pine:
Though his bark³ cannot be lost,
Yet it shall be tempest-tost.

¹ *eyelid*

² *become weak and emaciated*

³ *ship*

Hearing the sound of a drum, the witches realise that Macbeth is approaching. They chant a brief spell, then fall silent.

A prediction

The fighting over, Macbeth and Banquo are making their way across the stormy heath in the direction of the King's palace in Forres. Macbeth notes grimly that the dreadful weather is not in keeping with the fortunate outcome of the battle:

Macbeth: So foul and fair a day I have not¹ seen.

¹ *never before*

Suddenly Banquo notices the three sisters standing silently in the storm. He is startled by their wild, unearthly appearance, and questions them. They do not answer. However, when Macbeth asks them to speak, they greet him one after the other:

1st Witch: All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!

2nd Witch: All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!

3rd Witch: All hail, Macbeth! that shalt be King hereafter.

Macbeth is stunned into silence. He is already Thane of Glamis, a title inherited from his father: he is ambitious for further power, but has kept his desires to himself. It is as if the witches have read his mind.

“... the witches’ function in the play is not so much to bring a whiff of brimstone across the stage as to symbolize the murky, unexplored reaches of the human mind ... Their first appeal is not to anything directly evil in Macbeth’s nature but rather to the indecision, bewilderment and error which is their element and which they find echoed in his perplexity.”

John Wain, *The Living World of Shakespeare*, 1964

Banquo notices Macbeth's confusion. He addresses the witches once more, asking them what they foresee for him:

Banquo: If you can look into the seeds of time,
And say which grain will grow, and which will not,
Speak then to me ...

1st Witch: Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.

2nd Witch: Not so happy, yet much happier.

3rd Witch: Thou shalt get¹ kings, though thou be none:
So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo!

¹ *father*

Macbeth now challenges the witches: there is no reason why he should be given the Thane of Cawdor's title, he says, and the idea that he might become King is beyond belief. He urges them to tell him how they have arrived at these strange ideas, and what they are doing on this stormy, deserted heath. But the witches refuse to say any more, and they vanish into thin air.

Macbeth contemplates his future

Macbeth and Banquo are left shaken and confused by the witches' strange words and sudden disappearance. They joke uneasily about what has just happened, and what the witches have promised them.

At this point two noblemen, Ross and Angus, arrive on the scene. They have been sent by King Duncan to break the good news to Macbeth; he has been made Thane of Cawdor.

Macbeth and Banquo are stunned. Within minutes, one of the witches' prophecies has come true:

Banquo: What! can the Devil speak true?
Macbeth: The Thane of Cawdor lives: why do you dress me
In borrow'd robes?

Angus explains that Cawdor has been discovered to be a traitor; and that Duncan, hearing of Macbeth's bravery, has decided to reward him with the dishonoured Thane's title.

Out of hearing of Angus and Ross, the two generals talk again about the prophecy known only to the two of them. Banquo warns his friend to treat the witches' words with caution: he must not be influenced by the fact that one of their predictions has come true.

Banquo: ... oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of Darkness tell us truths;
Win us with honest trifles,¹ to betray's
In deepest consequence.²

¹ *less important truths*

² *matters of greatest significance*

However, Macbeth cannot stop thinking about the prophecy. He was already Thane of Glamis: he is now Thane of Cawdor: if the sisters are right, he could soon be King.

To Macbeth's horror, he finds that the possibility of murdering King Duncan has already formed in his mind. The idea both appals and entices him, and he is so engrossed in thought that he cannot bring his attention back to his present surroundings:

Macbeth: [Aside] Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings.
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,¹
Shakes so my single state of man,
That function is smother'd in surmise,²
And nothing is, but what is not.³

¹ *the thought of Duncan's murder, which exists only in my imagination*

² *all my powers of action are crushed by the obsession in my mind*

³ *the only things that now seem real to me are imagined, potential or in the future*

Macbeth tries to calm himself with the thought that he may be destined to achieve his ambition without taking any violent action:

Macbeth: If Chance will have me King, why, Chance may
crown me,
Without my stir.

Finally managing to break away from his intense speculation, Macbeth apologises to his companions, who have noticed that he is deep in thought.

Banquo and Macbeth agree that they must talk further, when the time is right, about the strange scene they have witnessed. Accompanied by Angus and Ross, the two generals now make their way to the King's palace.

Duncan announces his successor

I, iv

The Thane of Cawdor has been executed for supporting the King of Norway in his failed invasion. Duncan's son Malcolm has received news of the execution from an eyewitness. The condemned man is reported to have behaved calmly and honourably:

Malcolm: ... very frankly he confess'd his treasons,
Implor'd your Highness' pardon, and set forth
A deep repentance. Nothing in his life
Became him like the leaving it ...

Duncan remarks that it is difficult to judge someone's true character by appearances. He thought he had known the treacherous Cawdor well:

Duncan: There's no art
To find the mind's construction¹ in the face:
He was a gentleman on whom I built
An absolute trust ...

¹ *there is no sure way of establishing a person's real feelings and intentions*

At this moment Macbeth enters, along with Banquo and the two noblemen. Duncan is overcome with gratitude and admiration for the two generals who have saved Scotland from destruction. Macbeth insists that they were simply doing their duty, and deserve no special praise; but Duncan says that he intends to single them out for special honours and rewards.

Tearful with joy and relief, and determined to share the happiness of the victory, King Duncan now makes an announcement: his eldest son Malcolm is to inherit his estate and title. When Duncan dies, Malcolm will become King.

Macbeth is Duncan's cousin; but any hopes of obtaining the throne lawfully are immediately dashed. He realises that he can only become King through violent action. He desperately wants the witches' prediction to come true, but the acts that will make it possible must happen in total darkness and secrecy:

Macbeth: [Aside] Stars, hide your fires!
Let not light see my black and deep desires;
The eye wink at the hand;¹ yet let that be,
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.

¹ *let the eye be blind to the actions of the hand*

King Duncan proposes a visit to Macbeth's castle in Inverness. Macbeth sets off ahead to tell his wife of the news, and to prepare for the King's visit.

“Duncan’s generous and trusting nature contrasts strikingly with the evil which surrounds Macbeth ... he is an important symbol of the values that are to be defeated and restored in the course of the play ... Duncan’s faith, misplaced first in the rebellious Cawdor and then in Macbeth, provides the audience with an introduction to the atmosphere of betrayal that exists throughout the world of the play.”

Charles Boyce, *Shakespeare A to Z*, 1990

“Repentance is always close at hand, but Macbeth rejects it ... Macbeth is trying to kill his soul, which as resolutely refuses to die. Guilt joins forces with grace to prompt him to repent but he will not.”

Germaine Greer, *Shakespeare*, 1986

Lady Macbeth sees what must be done I, v

At the castle in Inverness, Lady Macbeth is reading a letter from her husband. It describes, in excited terms, the three witches and their prophecy that Macbeth will be King.

Lady Macbeth guesses, correctly, that her husband has been hesitating over the action that needs to be taken. She herself has no doubts whatsoever: if the chance to take the throne presents itself, they must seize it. They must not let sympathy or sentimentality prevent them from achieving their ambition, even if it means that lives must be sacrificed.

She realises that her husband will need firm, determined guidance from her if he is to achieve the goal that they both desire:

Lady Macbeth:

Yet do I fear thy nature:

It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness,
To catch the nearest way.¹ Thou wouldst be great;
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it ...²

¹ *to take the most direct route*

² *the wickedness that should complement your ambition*

A messenger rushes in to tell Lady Macbeth that King Duncan will be at Inverness castle this very evening. Lady Macbeth is exultant. This is their opportunity:

