



EVERYMAN

MACBETH

William Shakespeare

Edited by John F. Andrews
former editor of the *Shakespeare Quarterly*
Foreword by Zoe Caldwell

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MACBETH



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FOREWORD TO *MACBETH*

I came back from six weeks in India, centred and sane. Two weeks later I was involved in a benighted production of *Macbeth* and all health vanished. What is it about that play? I had been warned by a very distinguished member of the theatre profession that *Macbeth* was not only unlucky but a source of strange evil. 'How silly!' I thought – and jumped right in.

This was not my production; I had not cast it, nor had any influence on the design; and in three weeks it was to open on Broadway. The company, playing eight performances a week and having already played eight weeks on the road with two different directors, was in no mood for a fresh face. So I thought I'd simply read the text and find out where the play was being 'helped'. We actors and directors seem to feel it our duty to help William Shakespeare more than any other playwright. I know of no playwright who needs our help less!

Shakespeare has given us a short, sharp, riveting play about a splendid man's total destruction, a fate brought about by his becoming addicted to evil. Could anything be more timely? And to get us ready for such excitement, the playwright brings us all to attention by a crack of thunder, a bolt of lightning, and a brief exchange between three witches telling us that Macbeth is their target. Why Macbeth? Because he is the brightest and the best. The one with the most to lose.

'Brave', 'valiant', 'noble', 'worthy' Macbeth. The King loves him, the soldiers admire and respect him, he has close good friends and an adoring wife. His castle even has a pleasant seat. And he has a crucial element for evil: a human flaw. In his case, vaulting ambition. Banquo would have been of no use to the witches.

I became aware that the Scotland, or Scot lands, in this play is not an established country but a series of fiefdoms gathered

together by Duncan the King and desperately keeping attackers at bay. The bloodline is in fact created by Duncan in front of us early in the play, making the prophecy of 'King hereafter' impossible for Macbeth without murder. Macbeth is a renowned killer when we first meet him, and he is given great honours and promotions for it. So the witches couldn't have better material to work on.

Having read the witches' prophecies, Lady Macbeth knows what they will do to her husband. And yet, knowing how strangely ill-equipped he is to pursue his ambition ruthlessly, she does the most extraordinary thing. She calls on the spirits of the dark to take away what is most precious to her – her womanliness, her femininity – so that she may be strong enough to give her husband what he desires.

Godless images, images of chaos, of blood, of dark, permeate the play. But what truly stunned me while working on it was the daring way Shakespeare presents us *not* with an evil man but with a man who, while we are watching, removes himself from all human contact. 'Laugh to scorn the power of man' sends chills up my spine; for if that advice is followed, a man will surely become alone and ultimately powerless.

And that is what Macbeth becomes. The final sweep of the play has at its centre a lonely, slightly mad, desolate figure. With any luck, we weep. The fact that he speaks some of the most profoundly beautiful speeches in the English language while letting us see his blasted soul doesn't hurt. It is, I think, disconcerting for an audience that has come to see the wicked Macbeths at play to be confronted with such lucid understanding of human frailties. Sometimes the audience rejects the tragedy. But it is our job to follow step-by-step what Shakespeare has written and let the play do the work.

So why did all health vanish? Because I couldn't clear the path sufficiently for Mr Shakespeare. Why is it the 'bad luck play'? You find out for yourself.

Zoe Caldwell

Zoe Caldwell has played most of the female roles in the Shakespearean canon – with Cleopatra a personal favourite. Among her directorial credits is an acclaimed production of *Macbeth* on Broadway in 1988.

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION TO *MACBETH*

It is difficult to imagine a work of greater dramatic intensity than *Macbeth*. It portrays the most violent of passions. It makes extraordinary demands upon the audience's emotions. It raises fundamental questions about what it means to be human. And it suggests that the beginning of wisdom – and the antidote to those excesses that promote self-destruction – is a judgement tempered by humility, compassion, and a sense of cosmic awe.

Background

When Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*, probably in 1605–6, he wove into a coherent tragedy of ambition several strands of scattered narrative from the 1587 edition of Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*. For the title character, for example, the playwright combined elements of two episodes in Holinshed: Donwald's murder of King Duff (a crime largely instigated by Donwald's wife, and one that takes place in Donwald's castle while the King sleeps peacefully as a guest), and Macbeth and Banquo's rebellion against a Duncan who is venial and weak rather than saintly and meek as in Shakespeare. In Holinshed the Duncan who is slain by Macbeth and his allies can be construed as exceeding his authority as an elected monarch when he declares his son Malcolm to be the presumptive heir to the throne. And in Holinshed, once Duncan is removed from power and Macbeth receives 'by common consent' the 'investiture of the kingdom according to the accustomed maner', the new king reigns successfully and responsibly for a decade before he degenerates into the despot that Shakespeare's Macbeth becomes almost as soon as he seizes the crown.

At the same time that Shakespeare sullied the reputations of Macbeth and his Lady, he transformed Banquo from a rebel and

fellow assassin into a nobleman who explicitly rejects the course his companion chooses. The playwright's reasons for the alteration were probably twofold. First, he knew that the monarch he served (and who was now the official patron of Shakespeare's acting company, known formally as 'His Majesty's Servants' and informally as 'the King's Men') claimed descent from the legendary Banquo. Second, he knew that that same monarch would expect to see the progenitor of the Stuart dynasty represented as a loyal subject of his duly anointed lord.

There is a good possibility that Shakespeare's drama was first presented before King James at Hampton Court on 7 August 1606, when the King was entertaining the visiting King Christian of Denmark. If so, that fact would account for several features of *Macbeth* that appear designed to reflect the King's tastes and interests.

One such feature is the play's emphasis on the supernatural. During the period when he ruled solely as James VI of Scotland (he became James I of England when he was invited to succeed Elizabeth I after her death on 24 March 1603), the King had written a book on *Daemonologie* (published in London in 1599), and had administered capital punishment to women his courts found guilty of engaging in witchcraft.

A second feature is the play's stress on the kind of 'equivocation' (II.iii.9-13, 34-41; V.v.41-43) that undermines trust and threatens to dis-join the very 'Frame of things' (III.ii.16). On 5 November 1605 England had been stunned by the discovery of a conspiracy to blow up the Houses of Parliament in an effort to assassinate the king and his ministers. The Gunpowder Plot was widely perceived as a Satanic device to overthrow the true religion and return the British Isles to the corruptions of Catholicism, and that view was strongly reinforced by the testimony of a Jesuit priest who was convicted on 28 March 1606 of having been a party to the plot. Father Henry Garnet offered as his chief defence the argument that he was guilty of nothing more than 'equivocation' (speaking in a manner intended to mislead the hearer), and that equivocation was ethically and theologically permissible, even under oath, 'if just necessity so require'.

A third feature is the play's comparative brevity. As Kenneth

Muir points out in his introduction to the Arden edition of *Macbeth* (London: Methuen, 1979), 'Shakespeare was probably in Oxford in the summer of 1605, and he would then have heard that James I, on the occasion of his visit in August, approved of Matthew Gwinn's *Tres Sibyllae*, with its allusions to his ancestry, and that he disliked long plays' (p. xix). Over the years many scholars have suggested that the version of *Macbeth* that appeared in the 1623 First Folio (the only text of the play that survives) was one that had been cut for presentation before the king. Perhaps so, but a close examination of the tragedy will show that it works extraordinarily well as it stands; there is no need to hypothesize the previous existence of scenes not included in the text that has come down to us.

Comment on the Play

Actors customarily refer to *Macbeth* as 'the Scottish Play', and so potent are the superstitions traditionally attached to it that even today many theatre professionals refuse to incur the risk of mentioning it by name. Like Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Shakespeare's own *Richard III*, it is a script that requires its performers to utter blasphemies and engage in traffic with the agents of blackest Night. Like *Richard II* and *Julius Caesar*, it focuses on regicide. Like *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, it forces the audience to ponder cosmic questions, matters of 'deepest consequence'. But for all its correspondence with these and other exemplars of Renaissance stagecraft, *Macbeth* is in one respect unique: it alone is widely believed to carry a curse.

It would be fruitless to try and dispel the aura that surrounds this bloody piece of work. Every thespian can recount mishaps attributable to encounters with Shakespeare's most metaphysical tragedy; every director can detail the disasters that have plagued productions. At the same time, however, and more to the point, everyone knows that the demonic lore associated with *Macbeth* is an ineradicable aspect of the mystique this magnificent drama has always held for players and playgoers alike.

From Richard Burbage's original rendering of the title part (either at Hampton Court or at Shakespeare's Globe, where

Macbeth was probably being staged at least as early as 1607, though the earliest surviving record of a performance there dates from the spring of 1611, when Dr Simon Forman entered an account of it in his manuscript 'Booke of Plaies and Notes thereof') to recent revivals in theatres and on cinema and television screens around the world, the role of Macbeth has inspired a regal procession of memorable performances. But if the play's four centuries have seen many eminent actors essay the title role, they have bequeathed an equally imposing succession of Ladies to urge the warlike Thane towards the 'Golden Round' (I.v.30) for which both characters lust.

Nor is it difficult to understand why the dramatis personae of Macbeth and his wife have proven so enduring. In the hero's aspiration for the crown, Shakespeare depicts a 'vaulting Ambition' (I.vii.27) so primal as to rival the insurrection of Lucifer. In Macbeth's assassination of his beneficent king, the playwright details an act of treachery so egregious that it can be exceeded only by Judas' betrayal of his Lord. In the reign of terror that ensues in the aftermath of the slaying, Shakespeare portrays the desperation of a dictator so obsessed with safeguarding his throne that he becomes another Herod (Matthew 2:16-18), slaughtering innocent children and their mothers in a frantic but futile effort to arrest the future and trammel up 'the Life to come' (I.vii.7). Meanwhile, in the nocturnal vigils of Macbeth's Lady,* the playwright displays the torments of an accomplice so incardinated with guilt that, like Pontius Pilate, she must ultimately forgo any hope of ever cleansing her hands again.

This is a world of heightened dimensions, and its poetry is at times so opulent that, like the verbal music of *Othello*, it can be described as operatic. The atmosphere is so overcharged with passion and violence, so redolent of damnation, that it would not be inappropriate to refer to it as Shakespeare's answer to Dante's *Inferno*.

But if we conclude that Shakespeare's object in this tragedy is to engulf us in the maelstrom Macbeth and his wife stir up for

themselves and for the kingdom they usurp, we should bear in mind that much of the play's effect derives from our initial view of 'Noble Macbeth' (I.ii.69) as a splendid warrior whose valour in the service of his monarch has just earned him a new title. When we see the hero with Banquo on the blasted heath, rapt in speculation about the Witches' prophecy that he will be 'King hereafter' (I.iii.48), we should avoid presuming too quickly that 'Brave Macbeth' (I.ii.16) is foreordained to prove a villain. It is true that he is being singled out for the 'supernatural Soliciting' of the 'weyward Sisters' (I.iii.128, 130). And it is clear that in his opening scenes with his Lady (I.v. and I.vii) the Thane is all too receptive to her interpretation of what it means to be a 'Man' in such a situation. But up to the moment when he irrevocably determines to don a 'False Face' to 'hide what the False Heart doth know' (I.vii.82), Macbeth remains capable of saying 'We will proceed no further in this Business' (I.vii.31).

That he eventually does not say no to temptation is what the play is all about. And nowhere else in all the world's dramatic literature can we find so profound an analysis of what it means to choose evil and consign one's self to perdition.

By giving us an opportunity to observe Macbeth before he succumbs to the promptings of his unruly pride, Shakespeare introduces us to a man not all that different from ourselves, a human being with those frailties we can identify. We meet the hero when he can properly be designated as Banquo's 'Noble Partner' (I.iii.52), and at this juncture the only distinction between the two warriors is that Banquo doesn't permit his curiosity about the Witches' prophecies to blind him to the commonplace that 'oftentimes, to win us to our Harm, / The Instruments of Darkness tell us Truths' (I.iii.121-22).

By showing us the exchanges with Macbeth's Lady that follow, Shakespeare depicts the psychology of seduction. As the Thane's 'Desire' supplants his 'Judgement' (I.vii.41, 8), he finds that a proposition he initially dismissed as unthinkable begins to assume an air of inevitability. Once his wife persuades him to 'screw' his 'Courage to the Sticking Place' (I.vii.60), Macbeth's 'Heat-oppressed Brain' (II.i.38) produces a somnambulistic state in which first an imagined dagger and then a tolling bell summon

* As noted in *The Text of the Everyman Shakespeare* (p. xxxvi), 'Lady Macbeth' does not appear by that name in the original text of the play.

him to an act from which his whole being would otherwise recoil.

From this point on we are made privy to a study in the deterioration of humanity. In Shakespeare's time 'conscience' was indistinguishable from what we now call 'consciousness', and what Macbeth experiences in the wake of his crime is a process by which both are corrupted beyond reclamation.

Almost immediately Macbeth's homicidal narcosis yields to evasion: 'I am afraid', he says, 'to think what I have done'. Evasion leads to a willed suppression of self-knowledge: 'To know my Deed, 'Twere best not know my Self' (II.ii.48, 69-70). From there Shakespeare charts a steady decline to that hardening of the moral sense wherein the most brutal murders become virtually automatic - what Macbeth calls the 'Firstlings of my heart' (IV.i. 146). Eventually the man whose nature was thought 'too full o' th' Milk of Humane Kindness' (I.v.19) acknowledges that he has 'almost forgot the Taste of Fears' (V.v.9) or any other human feeling. And by the end of the play (V.v.24-28) he is left with the nihilistic observation that

Life's but a walking Shadow, a poor Player,
That struts and frets his Hour upon the Stage
And then is heard no more; it is a Tale
Told by an Idiot, full of Sound and Fury
Signifying nothing.

Moments after this speech we hear Macbeth 'wish th' Estate of the World were now undone', and it dawns on us that, having wagered his soul to gain the whole world (Matthew 16:26), he finally and ironically ends up with neither.

The disintegration of Macbeth's Lady follows a different course. Whereas her husband is passive in his initial encounter with evil suggestion, she is aggressive. At the beginning Macbeth pays at least some heed to his doubts; without hesitation his wife invokes demonic aid to transform herself into an unreflective, unfeeling 'Knife' to be employed in the 'Night's great Business' (I.v. 54, 70). Following the murder of Duncan, true to her resolve, she endeavours to prevent Macbeth from considering the deed too deeply: 'What's done is done' (III.ii.12), she says matter-of-factly. But after the Banquet Scene (III.iv), where she makes an admirable

attempt to preserve decorum in the face of her husband's agitation on seeing the ghost of Banquo, she largely disappears from view. Macbeth ceases to confide in her, and when at last we look in on her again in the Sleepwalking Scene (V.i), we realize that the madness she has sought to prevent in her husband has taken possession of her instead. The conscience she has tried to thwart now drives her to despair with its insistence that 'What's done cannot be undone' (V.i.76).

Happily, there is more to this dramatic action than the two central figures. While Shakespeare focuses most of our attention on the Macbeths' ruses to escape retribution for their misdeeds, he makes us increasingly aware of another realm beyond the claustrophobic cauldron their castle has become. We see 'Sinful Macduff' roused by the fate of his family to 'Dispute it like a Man' and become a minister of 'the Powres above' (IV.iii.223, 219, 237). We witness Malcolm's emergence as the true scion of a father who had embodied all the 'King-becoming Graces' (IV.iii.91). We receive a much-needed reminder that 'Angels are Bright still, though the Brightest fell' (IV.iii.22). And finally with the removal of the usurper whose name has now become identical with 'Tyrant', we observe that it is still possible for a sick society to purge itself of 'the Evil' (IV.iii.146) and assert, at least for a while, that 'the Time is Free' (V.vii.84).

It is a mark of the modernity of *Macbeth* that any optimism we may feel about the 'Measure, Time, and Place' to be ushered in at Scone (V.vii.102-4) is secured at the price of one of the most wrenching experiences the theatre can afford.

John F. Andrews