

MACBETH 2006 RESOURCE NOTES

"It will have blood", says Macbeth. "Blood will have blood"

In Macbeth the word and image of blood is used far more than in any other of his plays. The world of Macbeth is, quite literally a world dripping in blood.

From the image of Duncan slain having "so much blood in him" to the notion from Macbeth that "I am in blood stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er"; this play above all others is a savage and immediate expression of the cruelty that naked ambition can unleash. Even Macduff speaks pityingly of his country in terms as sanguine, when he cries "Bleed, bleed poor country."

It is a play of casual slaughter, where death is dealt out with consummate ease and where to die can be "to throw away the dearest thing he owed, as 'twere a careless trifle" It is a world where trust and truth and loyalty are cast aside in the lust for power, a world where "There's daggers in men's smiles". A world where having knowledge, as Banquo has, can lead to death.

But it is also a world where the dead do not lie quiet in their graves. "The times have been, that, when the brains were out, the man would die, and there an end." But not in the world of Macbeth. Here the dead rise again. Here all is a living and waking nightmare. Sleep is not a luxury that Macbeth can experience. "Macbeth shall sleep no more" because "Macbeth does murder sleep."

This is a haunted and evil world of secret, black and midnight hags. A world where a future, of sorts, is promised. These sirens of the wild night – these fates – these furies – speak only the plain and simple truth. But truth is itself distorted into a weapon in this most corrupt of plays. The truth is a dangerous thing. Indeed, and as Oscar Wilde puts it, "The truth is rarely pure and never simple"

Truth is not a guarantee of survival, but merely a timetable to destruction. Macbeth does not listen. Men seldom do listen when the fates take a hand. It is our nature to consider only our own security and safety. "And you all know, security is mortals' chiefest enemy"

It is a world of betrayal – a world where all who trusted Macbeth are betrayed by him. And where he himself is finally betrayed not by the prophesies of the weird sisters, but by his own ambition, which will draw him inexorably into a pool of his own blood.

Alan Stanford

The Divisions Of The Play

Macbeth, is a world in chaos and there is a line of descent into despotism that demonstrates the development of this chaos. The play falls into five defined parts.

Part One The Prophecy From Act1 S1 to Act 1 S4

Here Macbeth and Banquo are told, not only of the future as it will effect them, but are given instant proof of it by the granting of the title Thane of Cawdor to Macbeth within moments of its prophesy. This enkindles Macbeth's ambition, but not yet his determination to act upon it.

Part Two The Murder From A1 S5 to end Act 2

The political assassination of the King. Macbeth, urged on by his wife's ambition (some might say love) for him, takes the inevitable step of anyone wishing to seize power in a coup. He assassinates his predecessor. It is a pragmatic act. He does not hate Duncan. He kills him simply to take the crown. In the Mafia sense, it's just business. In the world of modern politics, this still occurs although in our more civilized world we tend to assassinate reputations rather than bodies.

Part Three The Betrayal From Act 3 S1 to Act 3 S4

The Macbeths have succeeded in their plan and have gained the crown. But something still aggravates Macbeth. The prophecy promised more to Banquo's posterity than to Macbeth's. Banquo will inherit the future whereas Macbeth holds only the present. Banquo must go. Macbeth will betray his friend and in consequence will unleash in himself the freedom to kill with impunity.

Part Four The Genocide From Act 3 S5 to end Act 4

Macbeth now believing in his security and safety unleashes genocide, killing any who stand in his way and as a punishment to any who cross him. Wives, children even servants are all legitimate targets for Macbeth. He has become a mass murderer by proxy. He cares little for his victims and he does not mind who he destroys as he annihilates any and everybody who stands in his way. If you are not with him, you are against him and must die. Ross's description of how Scotland stands is rather like a contemporary account of Kosovo or Rwanda. The chaos is now absolute.

Part Five The Revenge From A5 S1 to the End

Waiting in the wings, or rather in the forest is the avenging hero. Malcolm represents the future and the cleansing of the past. As always a new order will come to sweep away the old. Civilization returns and natural order is again in place. That is until the next prophesy and the next despot comes along.

For Sundry Weighty Reasons

Macbeth is a highly political play. As Macbeth establishes his dictatorship, his enemies try to destroy it. Political manoeuvres and cunning manipulation abound. Most of the principle characters engage at some point in the art of political manoeuvre.

Macbeth - in the persuasion of the murderers.

Ross - in his attempt to assess Macduff's response to the death of Duncan and the elevation of Macbeth to the throne.

Malcolm - in his pretence to Macduff of having no interest in the throne and his unsuitability for it in order to test Macduff's loyalty.

Ross - in his failure to give due warning to Lady Macduff of her impending danger.

Indeed, it would appear that Ross is the most politically gifted character in the play. He survives all the political intrigues and is still there at the end swearing allegiance to yet another king. You might think that he was almost in league with the demons who bring down Macbeth!

Of all the characters in the play it would seem that the one with least political acumen is Duncan. Of the traitor Cawdor he said

"... he was a gentleman on whom I built an absolute trust"

And in the very next moment he addresses Macbeth as

"worthiest cousin"

He is incapable of seeing below the surface or of reading from the

"false face what the false heart does know"

Macbeth – A hero or a villain?

Macbeth, it could be argued, might be considered (for all its complex psychology) as quite a simple morality play, since the bad guy gets his just deserts; proving that it doesn't pay to be bad. But does the play also work as a traditional tragedy? Is Macbeth a tragic hero or merely an evil villain?

The classic definition of a tragic hero, as the Greeks understood it from Aristotelian principles, demands that the character must be victim of a flaw in his character; a flaw which causes him – unwittingly – to make a fatal mistake, to experience a downfall which is caused by the flaw, and then come to a realisation of the flaw.

Macbeth certainly does not commit murder unwittingly, in a confused or innocent state (as Othello does when he kills his wife, or Oedipus, when he murders his father in Sophocles' Oedipus Rex).

On the contrary, Macbeth is fully aware of the potential moral consequences of his actions when he deliberates on them at the start of Act 1 scene 7. It is debatable whether or not Macbeth realises his mistake, or feels any remorse for his actions. His only remorse seems to be in his failure to realise the duplicity of the weird sister's prophecies.

Macbeth is so determined to achieve his aims that he does not mind whom he destroys, as he annihilates anyone in his way. It is as if he gives sway to evil for its own sake. This surely is the sign of a villain. However, unlike Richard III or Iago who are devoid (in their villainous activities) of any remorse or guilt, Macbeth does have many crises of conscience, which may just about redeem him and allow him the dignified status of "tragic hero"

His sense of regret and awareness of what he has lost can be seen in Act 5 scene 3, when he has been abandoned by all but a handful of employees, and is without "honour, love, obedience, troops of friends".

Towards the end of the play, he seems simply to be depressed and have given up on life (when he hears about his wife's death) and yet he engages in bursts of manic enthusiasm, determined to fight on to the bitter end. When he knows that death may come he has the determination to die "with harness on our back".

The essential question may be, does his final taking on of Malcolm's army spring from a noble will to die well (as a soldier) and be rid of his awful existence, or is it (since no-one of woman born can harm him) just a manic, murderous determination to go on killing till there is no one left to kill?

Sisters Three

Next to Macbeth himself and his much-hated wife, the characters that define the play most are the witches. Interestingly Shakespeare describes them as 'Weird Sisters' and defines them as

"black and midnight hags"

Banquo notes

"The earth hath bubbles, as the water has,
And these are of them."

And Macbeth observes that they vanish

"Into the air; and what seem'd corporal melted
As breath into the wind."

To Shakespeare's audience, witches were very much a reality. King James I, who reigned at the time the play was first presented, ruled a

Kindom where women were burned, hanged and drowned with a frightening regularity for the crime of witchcraft, and the appearance on stage of such creatures would have been accepted with respect if not fear.

But Shakespeare's knowledge of the form of theatre was deeper than his audience. He was following the rules of theatre first laid down over two thousand years previously by the Greeks. His creation, Macbeth, lived as any Greek tragic hero might – a hero with a fatal flaw – ambition. And like any Greek hero of old he is informed by fate of his future path.

The Weird Sisters in Macbeth fulfil the function of the furies, the fates, the oracles, of Greek Theatre. They inform Macbeth of the future and set him on his way.

In this production, we have given Shakespeare back his Three Weird Sisters, who almost play at the notion of summoning up demons. They are witches of the old religion. They are Wiccan. They live in a world of charms and superstition and country magic. They know that evil is ever ready to be called forth; and that it is easy to summon demons. They are always waiting for your call!

Shakespeare's Macbeth enjoys the reputation of being one of the Bards most popular plays. It is also extremely popular among actors who have always seen the role itself as an exciting challenge and an opportunity to play both hero and villain in one part.

The role of Lady Macbeth is also, despite its relative briefness – she only appears once in the second half of the play – quite a challenge for the actress involved. Indeed one must suppose that Shakespeare must have had a very gifted "boy" actor to take on the original performance.

The role has not always been popular however; Dame Edith Evans, doyenne of the British theatre for many years was once asked why she had never played the role. She replied that she could not possibly portray a woman who was such a bad hostess!

Famous Productions

1606 – Macbeth receives its first performance in August. The play is based on events that took place in Scotland during the eleventh century, as recorded in Raphael Holinshed's Chronicles. To create the plot Shakespeare amalgamated Holinshed's accounts of Macbeth and the murder of King Duff by Donwald.

It is likely that some scenes – those involving Hecate, the Old Man and much of Act 5 – were written by collaborators, as the play was required by the court of King James in quite a hurry.

1664 – Sir William D'Avenant presented a rewritten production in which the witches danced, sang and flew. Much of the language was simplified, or made more pertinent to the character of Macbeth, for instance,

"Hear it not Duncan, for it is a knell
That summons thee to heaven or to hell"

Was replaced by

"Oh Duncan hear it not, for 'tis a bell
that rings my coronation, and thy knell"

And Macbeth was given a dying line

Farewell vain world, and what's most vain in it – Ambition.

When Samuel Pepys saw this particular version in production and wrote that it was

"one of the best plays for the stage, and variety of dancing and music"

that he had ever seen.

1847 – Verdi's opera, based on the play, is premiered. It is full of dark, chilling music, which matches Shakespeare's words and images, especially in the moments before Macbeth murders Duncan and the Sleepwalking scene.

1888 – Henry Irving plays Macbeth at the Lyceum. Even though electricity had recently become available, he preferred to use gaslight, to create more atmospheric and gloomy lighting effects. He portrayed Macbeth as part villain – part victim, tortured by his conscience. Ellen Terry's performance as Lady Macbeth was not considered evil or wicked enough, coming across as a "gentle and affectionate wife" according to The Times. Some critics and writers were not impressed by Irving's self centred productions, including Shaw who referred to Irving's "costly bardicide".

1920's/1930's – Productions were often influenced by the expressionist art movement – for instance, Arthur Hopkins' 1921 set was dominated by three huge versions of the masks worn by the witches (through which lights shone on the action), while the design for the 1922 production by Jessner at the Staatstheater depicted Gothic vaulting which resembled a spider's web. A 1930's production by Komisajevsky (in which Banquo's ghost was a shadow on the wall) used a nightmarish set of steel helmets and machine guns to great effect.

1936 – Orson Welles directed a production of Macbeth in Harlem with an African-American cast, as part of USA government post- Depression scheme. This production – often referred to as the "Voodoo Macbeth" – treated the play as a melodrama about evil, and set it in a 19th century Haitian jungle, complete with a chorus of voodoo witches beating drums, a male Hecate and witch doctors engaging in black magic. The production sparked controversy and intrigue, with rumours of real-life voodoo magic running rife – members of the cast (who were tribal chiefs) sacrificed goats to make drum skins, and reputedly cast a spell on a critic (who had written a damning review in the Herald Tribune) who then died of pneumonia a few days later!

1948 – Ingmar Bergman directed a production in which the witches crawled around a big gnarled tree from which both people and carcasses hung. Bergman's idea that evil is always present was not shared by the actor playing the title role. He believed that Macbeth's downfall is caused by the decay of a feudal system rather than by an evil force – this difference of opinion created obvious tensions in the production!

1957 – Throne of Blood is a film based on Macbeth made by the famous Japanese director, Akira Kurosawa, and influenced by “Noh” drama and Samurai films. In this film Washizu (the hero) is tempted by a spirit who is spinning thread in the middle of a forest. Throughout the film, there are images of spiders’ webs, labyrinths and traps as Kurosawa explores Washizu’s ambition and human order that rebels against nature.

In the final battle (between Washizu and his own soldiers) Washizu is killed by an arrow through the neck, (filmed with the actor wearing a protective vest and shot by real arrows!). He is seen trapped in the middle of a barrage of arrows, which act like a cage.

1971 – Roman Polanski (also responsible for horror films such as Rosemary’s Baby) makes a film version, in which ordinary domestic life is juxtaposed with the horror of the story. At the end, Donalbain visits the witches, as the cycle of evil continues.

1976 – Trevor Nunn directed the play in the RSC’s “Other Place” theatre, with Ian McKellen and Judi Dench in the lead roles. This production was in a bare black room, with a circular platform, around which the actors sat watching on crates and the audience sat watching on benches and scaffolding. An intimate, claustrophobic atmosphere was created by surrounding the action with spectators, as if everyone was conspiring together in a ritual to summon up evil spirits. In a performance that ran without an interval, simple devices (such as swinging light bulb illuminating Macbeth after his wife’s death) were used to create a sinister mood.