

Macbeth



MACBETH is one of the greatest of the tragedies, swift as night and dark as spilt blood, with death and battle and witchcraft bound together in wonderful poetry to tell the story of a man and woman who destroyed themselves. Macbeth and his wife wanted the throne of Scotland, and they took it. But the act forced them into a murderer's world of sleepless torment, always struggling to find safety and always sinking deeper in their own terror.

The story opens in ancient Scotland during a time of war. The king has been defied by a band of rebels and he has sent his trusted captains, Macbeth and Banquo, to defeat them. In thunder and lightning, not far from the place of battle, three witches meet on a lonely heath. They plan to meet again at twilight, to speak to Macbeth as he returns from the fighting, and then they vanish into the storm.

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

The king of Scotland waits for news of the battle, and a sergeant arrives to tell him of Macbeth's valor. The victorious king also hears of the traitorous behavior of one of his noblemen, the thane of Cawdor, and decides to give the title to Macbeth instead. Macbeth is already the thane of Glamis, but this is a higher honor.

The witches gather again to wait for their victim, chattering to each other in quick, slippery rhyme like evil children. They sing an incantation to wind up the charm, and when Macbeth enters his first remark is an echo of one of theirs. "So foul and fair a day I have not seen."

With Macbeth is his fellow captain, Banquo, returning with him to report the details of the battle to the king, and it is Banquo who first sees the witches. But it is to Macbeth that the three of them speak: "All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, thane of Glamis!" "All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, thane of Cawdor!" "All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!"

Macbeth is too startled to answer, and it is the steady and honorable Banquo who inquires if there is any more to the prophecy.

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

The witches tell Banquo that he will beget kings and then they vanish, leaving Macbeth protesting that it is impossible that he should ever become thane of Cawdor. The king's messenger arrives to announce that the title has been bestowed upon him, and the new thane of Cawdor is suddenly shaken with a vision of the throne. For a moment an image of evil comes to him—"horrible imaginings" of the one way in which he can fulfill the prophecy and become king--and then he puts the whole thing away from him. "If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me." When he reaches the palace the king treats him with the greatest courtesy and announces he will pay a visit to Macbeth's castle at Inverness, and again Macbeth is shaken by temptation.

The scene moves to Inverness, where Lady Macbeth is reading the letter her husband wrote her after the battle. In cautious words he tells of the promise made by the three witches, and the mind of his wife leaps, as his has done, to the golden crown that lies waiting. But she knows her husband well. She can guess how he has been playing with the idea of murder and then shrinking back again, and she realizes it will be difficult to force him to take the final step that lies between them and the throne of Scotland.

*I fear thy nature;
It is too full o' the milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way. . . .*

A messenger arrives to say that the king of Scotland will be coming to the castle that night, and in a magnificent speech Lady Macbeth calls on all the forces of evil that lie in wait for man to help her to be cruel. When her husband enters she is ready for him and begins to hint at the king's death. "He that's coming must be provided for." Macbeth is evasive—"We will speak further"—and his wife tells him to put on a cheerful and welcoming countenance. "Leave all the rest to me."

The king arrives, accompanied by his sons and by the court, and Lady Macbeth bids him welcome with dignity and grace. Her husband is not by her side, and later, during supper, he finds it unendurable to stay in the same room with the king. He goes outside, to struggle with himself and with the thought of murder.

*If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly . . .*

But Macbeth cannot face the idea of doing it quickly. He cannot face the idea of doing it at all, for the king is his kinsman and his guest and moreover a good man.

*I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on the other.*

His wife has seen him leave and follows him out, to tell him the king has asked for him, and Macbeth gives her his final decision. "We will proceed no further in this business."

Lady Macbeth has a ruthless single-mindedness that her husband can never possess, and she will not admit defeat. Instead, she picks up the two sharpest weapons in her armory and uses them without compunction, telling her husband that he is a coward and that he does not love her. Her contempt brings Macbeth back to the point where she last left him, but he has more imagination than she and it plays fearfully about the future. "If we should fail—" She interrupts him before he has finished the sentence.

We fail!

But screw your courage to the sticking-place,
And we'll not fail . . .

Lady Macbeth has thought of everything. The king will sleep soundly after his long journey, and she will make his guards drunk so that they will sleep too. The king can be murdered with the daggers of his guards, and when they are found, drunk and bloody, no one will dare deny that they have done it. Macbeth is convinced in spite of himself that the thing is possible and the crown of Scotland really within his grasp, and they plan the murder for that night.

It is after midnight, but Banquo is too restless to sleep. In the courtyard, by torchlight, he encounters Macbeth, as restless as himself, and tries to talk with him about the three witches. Macbeth puts him off, and Banquo says good night.

Macbeth is waiting for the signal from his wife, the bell that will tell him the guards are drunk and asleep, and as he waits his imagination begins to act upon him and produces a phantom in the air.

*Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.
I have thee not and yet I see thee still. . . .*

There is blood on the dagger, and Macbeth tries to wrench his

mind away from what he knows to be a creation of his own imagination. "There's no such thing." His thoughts roam over the evil things of the night, wolves and witchcraft and murder moving like a ghost toward its prey, and when the bell rings he answers the summons as though he were himself a thing of the night. "I go, and it is done."

At the foot of the stairs, in the darkness, Lady Macbeth waits while her husband commits the murder. She has done her part and now there is nothing left except to listen to the sounds of the night. Lady Macbeth is not as strong as she thought she was. She is made of flesh, not iron, and her thoughts begin to get out of control as she remembers the scene she has just left.

*I laid their daggers ready;
He could not miss them. Had he not resembled
My father as he slept, I had done 't.*

Macbeth comes down to her, the murder completed, and there is the terrible whispering scene between the two of them, first the short, broken sentences of conspiracy and then Macbeth's gathering agony as he looks at his bloody hands. As he crept downstairs, someone stirred in his sleep in one of the rooms and said a little prayer, and Macbeth, listening, had tried to say Amen. He could not, and it troubles him. His wife implores him not to think about it, but he cannot stop himself.

*But wherefore could I not pronounce Amen?
I had most need of blessing, and Amen
Stuck in my throat.*

His wife tells him they dare not let their minds move in that direction. "It will make us mad." But Macbeth cannot control his own imagination, and the man who saw a "dagger of the mind" has also heard a voice crying through the castle.

*Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more!
Macbeth does murder sleep!' . . .*

Lady Macbeth does not know what her husband means, but the voice that haunts him goes on.

Still it cried, 'Sleep no more!' to all the house:
'Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor
Shall sleep no more; Macbeth shall sleep no more.'

Macbeth is almost in a state of trance with the horror of what he has done, and his wife tries to jerk him back to a more practical and matter-of-fact state of mind. She tells him to go and wash his hands and to put the daggers into the hands of the sleeping guards, but Macbeth shrinks from going back to the place of so much blood.

*I am afraid to think what I have done;
Look on 't again I dare not.*

His wife snatches the daggers from him and goes back to do it herself, leaving Macbeth to stare at his hands.

*Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No; this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red.*

His wife returns, her hands like his, for she has used the dead king's blood to smear his innocent guards. There has been a knocking at the south gate but Macbeth is powerless to move, and his wife gets him off to bed, talking to him reassuringly.

*A little water clears us of this deed;
How easy is it, then! . . .*

The castle porter has heard the knocking, but he is drunk and sleepy and slow to answer. He would rather amuse himself with the idea of how hard he would work if he were the porter at the gate of hell. "But this place is too cold for hell. I'll devil-porter it no further."

The knocking has been done by two noblemen, arriving early to visit the king, and when Macbeth enters to greet them he is in full command of himself. One of the noblemen, whose name is Macduff, goes in to see the king and finds him dead, and the whole castle is thrown into an uproar. Macbeth quickly kills

the two guards before they can explain the bloody daggers on their pillows, and then justifies the deed on the plea that he could not endure to have such evil murderers alive.

Both he and Lady Macbeth play their parts well, but the sons of the dead king are not deceived. They know their own lives are in danger—"There's daggers in men's smiles"—and they steal away in the night and leave Scotland. The act makes them appear guilty of having planned the murder, and since Macbeth, thane of Cawdor, is next in line to the throne, he is made king.

The scene shifts to the royal palace on the day of a great feast. Among the invited guests is Banquo, the man who knows the new king better than anyone else and has the strongest reason to suspect him of murder. Macbeth inquires carefully where his old friend will be during the day, and Banquo answers that he and his son will go riding, returning just in time for the banquet. Macbeth cannot feel safe on the throne as long as Banquo is alive, and he persuades two lawless men to kill him. His son must die too, for the three witches promised the throne of Scotland to Banquo's descendants, and Macbeth is resolved that this last part of the prophecy must never be fulfilled.

Neither Macbeth nor his wife has been sleeping well, and they are both tortured by "terrible dreams." Macbeth can almost find it in his heart to envy Duncan, the king whom they killed.

*Better be with the dead,
Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,
Than on the torture of the mind to lie
In restless ecstasy. Duncan is in his grave;
After life's fitful fever he sleeps well;
Treason has done his worst: nor steel, nor poison,
Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing
Can touch him further.*

They have managed to convince themselves that if Banquo and his son were dead they would at last find peace, and as night falls the murderers that Macbeth has sent move to their place of ambush.

Banquo and his son leave their horses and walk toward the

palace gate, talking of the weather and with the boy carrying the torch. When the murderers attack, Banquo shouts a warning and his son escapes. The cutthroats know they have done only half their task, and one of them goes to report to Macbeth.

Macbeth sees the murderer standing by the door just as the company is sitting down to the banquet, and he goes over to speak to him. "There's blood upon thy face." For a moment he permits himself the hope that the crime has been a complete success and then learns that the son is still alive and the task only half done. "But Banquo's safe?" Banquo is safe enough, dead in a ditch with twenty deep gashes in his head, and Macbeth turns back to the feast. Banquo, at least, will trouble him no more.

He looks for the empty seat that should be waiting at the table, but it seems to be taken. "The table's full." He stares at his empty seat, and the ghost of the murdered Banquo stares back at him, with blood in its hair.

Before his bewildered guests, Macbeth speaks to the man he killed. "Thou canst not say I did it." His wife reminds him in a fierce whisper of the dagger he once saw, which he also thought to be real. But nothing can unfix her husband's desperate attention until the ghost vanishes, and even then he cannot shake his thoughts loose again.

*The times have been,
That, when the brains were out, the man would die,
And there an end; but now they rise again . . .*

His wife reminds him of his guests and Macbeth at last reflects himself. For he is a host, and a good one.

*Give me some wine, fill full.
I drink to the general joy o' the whole table,
And to our dear friend Banquo, whom we miss . . .*

He should not have spoken Banquo's name. The corpse returns again that should be safe in a ditch, and the bloody image drives Macbeth half-crazed with fear. He is a notable warrior and can fight anything that is alive, but he cannot war with shadows. The

ghost vanishes again but the feast is ruined, and Lady Macbeth gets rid of the guests as quickly as she can.

Macbeth thought he could get what he wanted by murder, and now he has found that no amount of killing can keep him safe. His wife returns to find him in the grip of a terrible truth. "It will have blood, they say; blood will have blood." But almost at once he forgets it, for he is a practical man and must consider the problem of Macduff. Macduff has refused to come at his bidding, and from the spies he has planted in that nobleman's house Macbeth knows there is danger from him. At once, and seeing it as the obvious solution, the murderer's thoughts go back to murder again. As for the ghost he thought he saw that evening, the whole thing can surely be explained by lack of sleep. When he and his wife are a little more accustomed to killing, things will go more smoothly and easily for them.

Macbeth decides to consult the three witches again, since they were the ones that started him on his course. Hecate, moon goddess and goddess of ghosts, prepares a special answer for the new king which will destroy Macbeth through hope. For, as she tells the three witches,

*You all know security
Is mortals' chiefest enemy. . . .*

The witches prepare a special brew for their boiling cauldron, pouring into it things of poison and evil and torment that turn it into a "hell-broth" while they sing incantations around it.

*Double, double, toil and trouble;
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.*

Macbeth enters and the witches agree to show him the future. There is a sound of thunder and three apparitions rise up from the cauldron. The first tells him to beware of Macduff, the second says that Macbeth will never be harmed by anyone born of woman, and the third assures him that he will not be conquered until Birnam wood comes to the hill of Dunsinane. To

Macbeth all this spells security, but he cannot keep himself from asking one thing more. He cannot forget the earlier promise made to Banquo, that his descendants should rule Scotland, and he must know if it is still true. The witches show him a vision of a long line of kings, with a bloody Banquo smiling as he exhibits them, and Macbeth gives way to furious rage at the witches who have betrayed him.

*Infected be the air whereon they ride,
And damned all those that trust them! . . .*

Macbeth learns that Macduff has gone to England to ask for help from the dead king's elder son, and in revenge he sends murderers to the nobleman's castle to slaughter his wife and children. A messenger comes to warn of danger, but Lady Macduff does not know what to do. "Whither should I fly?" There is no time in any case, for the murderers are already in the castle, and she and her brave little son are killed by them.

Macduff, in England, finds that the king's elder son is unwilling to trust anyone in Scotland; for Macbeth, who was once "thought honest," became a traitor and the rest may too. But finally, after a long conversation, the two men convince each other of their good faith, and then the news comes to Macduff that his family has been murdered. The prince talks of revenge, but the anguished father sees no adequate way he can revenge himself on Macbeth. "He has no children." Only one hope is left him for the future: to go back to Scotland and find the murderer at the other end of his sword.

Macbeth goes out to gather the soldiers together, leaving his wife alone in the castle. As long as they were together they could derive strength from each other, but now that Lady Macbeth is alone she feels the powers of darkness closing in. She can control herself by daylight, for her will is very strong, but she is helpless at night. She keeps a light beside her always, to ward off the dark; but she cannot escape from her dreams and lately she has begun to walk in her sleep. Her disturbed waiting-woman has called in the doctor, and the two of them are watching together in case Lady Macbeth walks that night.

This is the famous sleepwalking scene, one of the most brilliant pieces of writing in the history of dramatic literature. For Lady Macbeth is re-living the murder of the king, the thing she has tried so hard to push into the back of her mind and forget. Her mind is choking and drowning in blood, and all the advice she whispered to her husband that night, all her dreams of power and safety, are blurred by the persistent image of what the two of them did. "Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?"

All this while, she has been moving her hands against each other, over and over again, trying to wash them. The woman who once thought that "a little water" could do away with all the evidence of murder now rubs endlessly at the spots she thinks are there, murmuring to herself, talking of Banquo, of the king, of Macduff's wife, all dead and all coming back to her in the broken, wavering images of sleep. Then she slides back in her memory to the knocking at the gate and reaches out to a husband who is no longer beside her. "Give me your hand. What's done cannot be undone." She goes back to bed, and the horrified doctor says that she has more need of a priest than of a physician. "God, God forgive us all!" And indeed Lady Macbeth has great need of forgiveness.

The English and Scottish soldiers, led by the dead king's elder son, march toward Dunsinane, and Macbeth within the castle listens to the reports of their advance. His own men are deserting him, and Macbeth curses the cowards by whom he is surrounded. He buckles on his armor before he needs it, but there is no real security in anything. Even the doctor who has come to cure his wife can do nothing, and Macbeth asks him a question out of his own desperate need.

Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?

The doctor admits that he cannot, and the weight upon the murderer's heart continues.

Outside, in the country near Birnam wood, the invading force pauses and the prince sends out an order. Each soldier is to cut down a green bough and carry it in front of him, so that no one can tell how many men there are, and in that formation they advance upon the castle of Dunsinane.

Within the castle Macbeth waits. He is sure the thick walls can withstand a siege and that famine and sickness will destroy his enemies before they can destroy him. Yet one enemy has already made an entrance, for the wailing of the women tells him that his wife is dead. It seems to Macbeth that there is very little sense to human living.

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
 To the last syllable of recorded time;
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
 The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
 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.

A messenger comes with the news that Macbeth never thought to hear, that Birnam wood is moving toward Dunsinane. The prophecy of the three witches is coming true, and for a moment Macbeth almost does not care. "I 'gin to be awearry of the sun." But at least he can die like a soldier, and perhaps he will not die after all. For the witches made him another prophecy: that no man born of woman could ever harm Macbeth.

His soldiers refuse to follow him and they give up the castle to the invaders, but Macbeth, shouting defiance, fights on alone. He hesitates when he sees Macduff, for enough of that family has been slaughtered already, but Macduff's sword is out and they fight. Macbeth exults in the fact that he is untouchable, and Macduff reveals that he was not "of woman born" but ripped

from the womb. Macbeth realizes in despair that the witches have mocked him and that there is no hope left. But he goes on fighting, and he dies like a warrior if he could not live like a man.

The young prince becomes the new king of Scotland and announces the end of "this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen." But Macbeth and his wife were more than that. They were violent human beings who took a wrong turning, for Shakespeare could make even murderers real. Their deaths were not a tragedy but their lives were, and, with their passing, peace came again to Scotland.