



## Introduction to the Play

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### Background to *Macbeth*

*Macbeth* is based on the career of Scottish King Macbeth. The actual Macbeth lived from 1005 to 1057 and reigned from approximately 1039 to 1054. At that time in Scotland, it was not a horrific crime to take the throne away from a weak, royal relative. In fact, in eleventh century Scotland, the overthrow of a king was a common occurrence. As far as historians can tell, the actual Macbeth took the throne away from his ineffective cousin, King Duncan, in approximately 1039. As a grandson of King Malcolm II, Macbeth did have a claim to the throne of Scotland. King Macbeth gained the throne by a civil war rather than murder, and King Duncan died in battle. There is no historical evidence that Banquo existed. Also, the historical King Duncan was close in age to Macbeth, but Shakespeare altered the account to make King Duncan much older. The historical Macbeth ruled Scotland with wisdom and grace for fifteen peaceful years. His rule came to an end when the exiled Prince Malcolm invaded Scotland with English forces.

The story of Macbeth as told by the historian Holinshed became based on legend as much as history. Holinshed portrays Macbeth plotting the murder of King Duncan with both his wife and Banquo after hearing a prophecy from the Three Witches. After the murder of King Duncan, King Macbeth rules well for about ten years. However, the witch's prophecy that Banquo will be the father of many kings begins to bother Macbeth. He orders the murder of

Banquo and his son Fleance. However, Fleance escapes. Other nobles rise up against Macbeth and, led by Macduff, defeat Macbeth at Birnam Wood, carrying branches to camouflage their attack.

Shakespeare changed the plot about Banquo's responsibility for King Duncan's murder. Many feel that this was changed in order to keep pure the story of Banquo's being a father of the Stuart kings and the ancestor of James I. Most Shakespearean scholars think that the specific details of witchcraft came from the published work of King James I. Of course, Shakespeare took the time of ten to fifteen years and condenses it into a few days and nights. Even though *Macbeth* is one of Shakespeare's shortest plays, it is considered by most experts to be one of Shakespeare's most powerful portrayals of how lust for power can corrupt a person's soul.

It is important to remember that *Macbeth* is not primarily a history play but is considered to be one of Shakespeare's final tragedies. One helpful way to view this play is through the template of a tragedy. In Shakespeare's era, a tragedy always focused on the tragic protagonist: a person of high stature whose personal flaw causes him to choose wrongly. While the reader disagrees with Macbeth's actions, Macbeth is nevertheless a well-spoken and brave nobleman. Macbeth's wrong choice upsets the "Great Chain of Being," and the tragic protagonist pays the extreme penalty for this disorder. The Great Chain of Being was

Macbeth wishes that the knocking could wake King Duncan.

### **Act two, Scene 3**

Lord Macduff and Lord Lennox are knocking at the gate. A drunken porter hears the knocking and pretends he is the porter at the gate of hell. He opens the gate and converses wittily with Macduff and Lennox about alcohol. Macbeth enters and leads the nobles to Duncan's chamber. Lennox tells Macbeth about strong storms, earthquakes, and other omens of evil that occurred in the night. Macduff discovers that the king is dead and rings the alarm bell. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth pretend that they are appalled, and the entire castle is awakened with the horrible news. Macbeth uses the confusion as an opportunity to kill the king's guards, so that they cannot contradict the evidence. Malcolm and Donalbain assume they are also targets and flee from Macbeth's castle.

### **Act two, Scene 4**

An old man near Macbeth's castle tells Ross about the evil omens that occurred during the night. Macduff welcomes Ross and tells of Prince Malcolm and Donalbain's quick departure from the castle. He wonders if their departure is a sign that they may have murdered their own father.

### **Act three, Scene 1**

Because everyone thinks the princes have probably killed King Duncan, Macbeth has been

named King of Scotland. Banquo thinks about the Three Witches and questions whether or not Macbeth has murdered King Duncan. Banquo leaves Macbeth's castle, and Macbeth hires two assassins to follow Banquo and kill him and his son Fleance. That way, no heir of Banquo can become king.

### **Act three, Scene 3**

On a road outside of Macbeth's castle, the killers attack Banquo and his son. They are successful in their murder of Banquo, but Fleance escapes unharmed.

### **Act three, Scene 4**

Back at Macbeth's castle, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth put on a lavish banquet for their guests. One of the killers quietly informs Macbeth that they have killed Banquo but that Fleance still lives. Macbeth is upset by the news, but he grows even more upset when he sees the ghost of Banquo at the table. Macbeth talks to the ghost, which makes him appear mad to the guests. Lady Macbeth then asks the guests to leave. After the botched banquet, Macbeth tells Lady Macbeth that he does not trust Macduff since he did not attend the banquet. He will go to the witches to try to learn more. Lady Macbeth expresses her concern that Macbeth does not get sleep anymore.

### **Act three, Scene 5**

On the heath, the head witch, Hecate, tells the Three Witches they should not have given

information to Macbeth. She tells them to be ready to meet Macbeth tomorrow.

### **Act three, Scene 6**

At Macbeth's castle, Lennox discusses the murders with another lord. They hint that they think King Macbeth is at the core of all the deaths. They comment that Macduff has gone to England, perhaps to meet up with Prince Malcolm and to ask King Edward the Confessor for help.

### **Act four, Scene 1**

In a cavern, the Three Witches make an evil brew in a cauldron. Macbeth enters and asks the witches for advice. They bring up three spirits. The first spirit warns him to be wary of Macduff. The second tells Macbeth that "none of woman born" can harm him. The third tells him that he will be safe unless Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane Hill. Macbeth is relieved, since the last two prophecies seem to ensure that he will be victorious. Then Macbeth asks if Banquo's sons will be kings. The witches produce a vision of eight kings, followed by Banquo's ghost, who is smiling and indicating that the kings are all his heirs. The witches go away. Lennox arrives and informs Macbeth of Macduff's desertion. For punishment, Macbeth declares he will kill all of Macduff's family and plunder his home and possessions.

### **Act four, Scene 2**

Ross goes to Macduff's castle to tell Lady Macduff that her husband is in England. Lady

Macduff is afraid and wonders if her children will be safe. She tells her son that his father is dead, but the boy knows that she is not telling the truth. Lady Macduff receives a warning of danger, but it is too late. Macbeth's men kill Lady Macduff and her son.

### **Act four, Scene 3**

In England, Prince Malcolm and Macduff discuss the problems in Scotland. To test Macduff's loyalty, Malcolm tries to convince Macduff that he does not feel qualified to lead Scotland. Macduff mourns for Scotland, and Malcolm tells him of his determination to take the crown. Ross arrives and tells them that Macduff's family has been killed. Macduff and Malcolm prepare an army to return to Scotland and take revenge on Macbeth.

### **Act five, Scene 1**

In Macbeth's castle, Lady Macbeth's doctor and her lady-in-waiting comment about Lady Macbeth's mental stability. They see Lady Macbeth enter the room walking and talking in her sleep. She makes movements as though she is washing her hands and becomes upset because she cannot make them clean of blood. She returns to her bedroom, and the doctor tells the lady-in-waiting that he cannot help Lady Macbeth recover her sanity.

### **Act five, Scene 2**

On a field near Dunsinane, Macbeth, Angus, and Caithness, rebels against Macbeth, discuss with Lennox the rumors that Macbeth is

*Fleance*: Banquo's son

*Macduff*: Thane of Fife and a leader of the rebellion against Macbeth

*Lady Macduff*: Wife of Macduff who is killed by Macbeth's mercenaries

*Macduff's Son*

*Lennox, Ross, Angus, Mentieth, and Caithness*: Scottish lords who grow to mistrust Macbeth's leadership and battle against him at Dunsinane

*Three Witches*: Also known as the Weird Sisters; prophesize Macbeth's fate

*Hecate*: Queen of the witches

*Captain*: A leader of King Duncan's army

*Porter*: A servant who opens Macbeth's gate

*Three Murderers*: Three men with shady pasts who agree to murder Banquo and Fleance for a bounty

*Doctor*: Medical attendant to Lady Macbeth

*Gentlewoman*: A woman who acts as nurse to Lady Macbeth

*Seyton*: Macbeth's personal attendant and officer in his army

*Siward*: Earl of Northumberland, an English Lord who joins Macduff and Malcolm against Macbeth

*Siward's Son*

*Other Minor Characters*: Attendants, messengers, servants, murderers, soldiers, apparitions

### Shakespeare and Stage Directions

The plays of Shakespeare are so well written that they seem to leap off the page and come to

life. However, the plays themselves have very few stage directions. Perhaps this is because Shakespeare's plays were performed in large amphitheaters that were very simple.

This was a time before electric lights, so the plays needed to take place during the day to utilize the natural light. The average time for a performance was between noon and two in the afternoon. Theater historians report that there were typically no intermissions; plays ran from beginning to end without a break and took about two hours.

The set might be painted canvas to illustrate whether the play was occurring in a forest or a town, for example. Sometimes the background was accompanied by a sign that indicated the place as well. Props were few and large: a table, a chariot, gallows, a bed, or a throne.

However, the audience attending Shakespeare's plays expected a spectacle for the price of admission. Therefore, there were many devices to produce a gasp from the audience. For example, a device in the loft of the theater could raise and lower actors so that they could play gods, ghosts, or other unusual characters. Additionally, a trapdoor in the stage offered a chance for a quick appearance or disappearance. The actors could suggest a beheading or hanging with various illusions on the stage. Sound effects suggesting thunder, horses, or war were common. Music was important, and drums and horns were often played.

Most important to the sense of spectacle were the costumes worn by the actors. These were elaborate, colorful, and very expensive. Therefore, they often purchased these outfits



## Introduction to Shakespeare

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### A Brief Biography of William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare was born in April 1564 to John and Mary Shakespeare in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. His birthday is celebrated on April 23. This is memorable because April 23 is also the day Shakespeare died in 1616.

Shakespeare was the eldest of nine children in his family, six of whom survived to adulthood.

William Shakespeare's father worked with leather and became a successful merchant early in his career. He held some relatively important government offices. However, when William was in his early teens, his father's financial position began to slide due to growing debt. After many years, John Shakespeare's fortunes and respect were restored, but records indicate that the years of debt and lawsuits were very stressful.

Historians assume that young Will went to school and took a rigorous course of study including Latin, history, and biblical study. In 1582, at the age of eighteen, he married Anne Hathaway, who was three months pregnant. Studies of Elizabethan family life indicate that Anne's situation was not unusual since it was accepted that the engagement period was as legally binding as the marriage. The couple had a daughter, Susanna, followed by twins, Hamnet and Judith. Not much is known about Shakespeare during the next seven years, but his name is listed as an actor in London by 1592. This was a difficult time for the theater

because measures to prevent the spread of the plague regularly closed the theaters.

Between 1594 and 1595, Shakespeare joined the Chamberlain's Men as a playwright and an actor. The acting company featured actor Richard Burbage, and they were a favorite of Queen Elizabeth I. During this time, Shakespeare was writing such plays as *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Even though Shakespeare was enjoying great success by the time he was 32, it was dampened by the death of his son, Hamnet, in 1596. Soon after, Shakespeare refocused on his home in Stratford where he bought an estate called New Place, with gardens, orchards, and barns in addition to the main home. He still maintained a home in London near the theater.

In 1599, Shakespeare wrote *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, and *As You Like It*. The Globe Playhouse was up and running, with Shakespeare a 10 percent owner. This means that he was able to earn 10 percent of any show's profits. This business position helped him solidify his wealth.

In 1603, Shakespeare's reputation earned his acting troop the sponsorship of James I, who requested one play performance per month. Their name changed to the King's Men. By this time, Shakespeare had written and performed in almost all of his comedies and histories. He was proclaimed the finest playwright in London.

But Shakespeare still had what is considered his finest writing to do. He began his writing of tragedies beginning with *Hamlet* in 1600. In the following five years, Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*. Why Shakespeare turned to these darker, more serious themes is widely debated by scholars. But all agree that these plays established Shakespeare's premier place in English literature.

Toward the end of 1609 through 1610, Shakespeare began to write his problem romances. These works, *The Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Tempest*, are rich with mature themes of forgiveness, grace, and redemption.

After 1611, at the age of 47, Shakespeare moved back to Stratford exclusively, settling into life at New Place and enjoying a renewed relationship with his daughters, especially Susanna. He prepared a will, which has become famous for the request to leave his wife their "second best bed." Many have debated whether this is a sentimental or cynical bequest. In the same year that his daughter Judith married, 1616, Shakespeare died at the age of 52. However, it was not until 1623 that all his plays were collected into one manuscript, now referred to as the *First Folio*. The fellow King's Men players who compiled the manuscript, Heming and Condell, entitled it *Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies*.

### Shakespeare's England

The age of Shakespeare was a glorious time for England. William Shakespeare's life in England was defined by the reign of Queen

Elizabeth I (1558–1603). During her leadership, England became an important naval and economic force in Europe and beyond.

England's rise to power came when its navy defeated the Spanish Armada in 1588, when Shakespeare was about 24 years old. Queen Elizabeth was skillful in navigating through the conflicts of religion. She maintained religious independence from Rome as the Church of England became firmly rooted during her reign. Additionally, she financed the establishment of colonies in America to grow the British Empire and expand its economic opportunities. At the end of her reign, England was the leader in trade, naval power, and culture.

Because of its role as the main economic, political, and cultural center of England, London became the hub of England's prosperity and fame. If anyone wanted to become famous as a poet or dramatic writer during Shakespeare's time, he would need to be in London. In fact, London was full of great writers besides Shakespeare, such as Marlowe, Sidney, and Jonson. Yet, even as London was full of parties, trade, and amusement, it was also full of poverty, crime, and disease. Crime was a large problem, and the main jail in London was called the Clink. Disease and poor sanitation were common. In fact, twice in Shakespeare's lifetime, London endured an outbreak of the plague, which killed thousands upon thousands of people.

Before Queen Elizabeth took the throne, London was a modestly sized city of about 60,000 people. By the time James I took the throne at her death, more than 200,000 people

Clothing in Shakespeare's time was very expensive. Of course, servants and other lower-class people wore simple garb, often a basic blue. But if a person wanted to display his wealth, his clothing was elaborate and colorful, sewn with rich velvet, lace, and gold braid. An average worker might earn seven or eight English pounds in a year, and a very nice outfit for a nobleman might cost as much as 50 or 60 pounds. In other words, if seven or eight healthy workers pooled their money for the entire year, spending nothing else, they could buy only one respectable nobleman's outfit.

Entertainment was an important part of life in Shakespeare's England. Popular sports were bear-baiting, cockfighting, and an early form of bowling. Bear-baiting, in which a dog was set loose to fight with up to three chained bears in the center of an amphitheater, and cockfighting, in which roosters pecked each other to death, were popular then but would be absolutely unacceptable entertainment today.

Bowling, however, has maintained its popularity in our current culture.

In London, a main source of entertainment was the theater. Some theaters were very large and could hold more than two thousand people. Even poor people could attend the theater since entrance cost only one penny (equivalent to 60 cents today), and they could stand around the stage. For a bit more money, a person could sit in an actual seat during the performance. However, some thought that going to the theater could be dangerous to your body or your soul. The theaters were closed twice during the plagues to reduce the spread of the disease. The Puritans disapproved of the theater as an unwholesome leisure time activity. And the Puritans also disliked the theater because the theaters were located in an area of London surrounded by brothels and bars. Nevertheless, the theater became respectable enough by 1603 to be supported by James I—and he was the monarch who directed the King James Version of the Bible to be translated.



ACTIVITY 4

*What the Chambermaid Overheard* Act one, Scene 5

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**Background** In Act one, Scene 5, Lady Macbeth reads aloud a letter from her husband that relates his encounter with the witches.

**Directions** Imagine that you are a chambermaid who has accidentally overheard Lady Macbeth reading her husband's letter and her comments about the contents of the letter immediately after. Compose a short speech in which you tell another servant what you overheard. Also tell what you may now fear from Macbeth and Lady Macbeth based on this information. Use another sheet of paper, if necessary.





## ACTIVITY 12

*Writing a Letter to Mom*Act two, Scene 3

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**Background** Malcolm and Donalbain, Duncan's sons, wisely and hastily leave Macbeth's castle after their father's murder, questioning whether or not Macbeth's show of grief is real or just a cover-up. Since they are heirs to the throne, they are naturally worried about their own safety.

**Directions** As Malcolm (the named heir), write a letter to your mother, Duncan's wife (the Queen of Scotland). Explain what has happened, where you and Donalbain will seek refuge, and anything else that a son would say to his mother upon finding out that his beloved father has been murdered. Mention your suspicions of Macbeth (reread lines 153–165 for help). Write your letter below. Use another sheet of paper, if necessary.



## ACTIVITY 14

*Scotland Demands an Accounting*Act two

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**Background** Much occurs in Act two. The people of Scotland are outraged at the rumors of the death of their king and frightened by strange omens.

**Directions** As a reporter, write an article, in your own words, about the events occurring in Act two. The people of Scotland will be relying on you to provide them with accurate news coverage and analysis, so include the information listed below. Use another sheet of paper, if necessary.

- What Ross and Macduff said about why the king's servants would have killed him
- The person(s) whom the thanes suspect of actually killing the king
- Who is to become the next king
- The strange and supernatural events that have taken place, and what you think they are foreshadowing
- Anything else you think the Scottish people need to know to make sense of such a tragedy