



**UNDERSTANDING SHAKESPEARE:
MACBETH**

Robert A. Albano

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MERCURYE PRESS

Los Angeles

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NOTE: All act and scene divisions and lines numbers referred to in this text are consistent with those found in *The Norton Shakespeare* (Stephen Greenblatt, editor).

INTRODUCTION

Macbeth was written in 1606, at a time when Shakespeare had already written many great tragedies and was already considered a master of that art form. Yet, *Macbeth* is also the shortest tragedy that Shakespeare wrote. For this reason, many high school teachers select it as the only Shakespeare play that they will use in the classroom. However, such teachers may be making a mistake; for, although *Macbeth* contains fewer lines than other Shakespeare tragedies, it deals with issues that are as complex as that found in any of the other tragedies.

The reason that *Macbeth* is shorter than other tragedies is probably because it was presented as a court performance, a **private performance**. At that time, **James I** was the King of England. And, as will be explained later, there are numerous historical references and dramatic devices that Shakespeare included expressly for the satisfaction and enjoyment of his king.

During the Renaissance, plays were often performed privately inside the court or palace of an aristocrat. However, the king or duke or lord might also demand that the performance last only a certain amount of time. He could very easily request the acting troop to take a three-hour performance and present it in two and a half hours or less. The acting troop would gladly accept because the private

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performance meant additional money for them and possibly a patron.

Such seems to be the case with *Macbeth*. Quite possibly the play existed in a longer form and was cut down to fit the time restriction set by King James I. On the other hand, Shakespeare could just as easily have written the play as it exists today without ever having created a **longer version** of it. A few critics believe that a longer version existed because they feel that last act is too rushed and that the last scene regarding Lady Macbeth is not properly explained. However, the more likely possibility is that a longer version never existed at all. A careful reading of the play will reveal that Shakespeare does provide a number of clues and hints in his text so that the final action of the play does not require any additional commentary or explanation.

The play of *Macbeth* is one of great historical significance to King James I. One of the major characters in the play is **Banquo**, who may have been just a legendary figure that never really existed at all. James I, however, believed not only that Banquo was a real person: he also believed that Banquo was one of his direct ancestors.

Another aspect of this play that would have appealed to King James I was the inclusion of witches, ghosts, and other **supernatural elements**. James I, like many people of his day, believed that there really were witches who were in contact with the devil and who had magical abilities to bring harm

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to mankind. In fact, James I even wrote a book on that subject.

For the reader who is approaching *Macbeth* for the first time, one of the key elements to think about concerns **the role of the witches**. Do they represent **evil** or **fate**? Or do they represent something entirely different? The reader's response to this question will most definitely affect his or her interpretation of the entire play.

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ACT I

ACT I, 1: SPECTACLE AND FATE

Macbeth begins with **spectacle**. Just as movie audiences today may find elaborate special effects to be thrilling and exciting, so too did Renaissance theater audiences enjoy the stage effects that would accompany certain performances. Shakespeare immediately brings his audience into the supernatural world. Plays would be performed on a mostly bare stage during the daytime. However, to create the proper mood, musical instruments and other devices were used. In this scene, three witches are on stage during a severe storm. To create the sound of thunder and other storm noises, the musicians could bang on large kettle drums or rattle thin sheets of metal. The plays were also performed on a raised platform. From underneath that platform, a stagehand could create smoke of some kind and send it through a hole in the floor. The stage would thus be filled with smoke or haze, as if a mist had covered the ground. Such simple effects would be more than sufficient to establish the eerie atmosphere necessary for the scene.

The first scene of the play is extremely short: only eleven lines long. Yet it is extremely crucial not only in providing the supernatural atmosphere of the play, but also in establishing two thematic concepts.

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Three witches are standing in the open during a storm, and one of them asks when they shall meet again. Another witch responds that they will meet “when the hurly-burly’s done” (line 3). The expression *hurly-burly* refers both (1) to the storm and (2) to the battle that is taking place. The country of Scotland is actually at war with two enemies: (1) a band of Scottish rebels led by a man named Macdonald and (2) the country of Norway.

The significant lines are the ones where the **witches** correctly predict that the battle will be done by sunset (line 5) and that they will encounter the Scottish hero Macbeth on the heath (line 7: heath – an open and wild piece of land). The witches are able to see the future and, as will happen later in the play, can also affect future events. For this reason, they could be said to symbolize **fate**. Throughout just about every single work that Shakespeare wrote, fate plays an extremely important role. Shakespeare clearly believed that there was a supernatural force beyond the understanding and control of mankind that shaped and controlled the destinies of everyone. In this regard, Shakespeare was opposed to the philosophy of the **Humanists**, who believed that man could shape his own destiny by the power of his own mind. Readers should always pay special attention when Shakespeare uses the word fate or one of its synonyms, especially **destiny, chance, and fortune**.

At the end of the scene the witches chant together, “fair is foul, and foul is fair” (line 10). The

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