MACBETH

Historical and theatrical background

Macbeth was written early in 1606, and the earliest recorded performance was in 1611 at the Globe Theatre, London. It is likely, however, that the play had been performed earlier than this.

It is one of the shortest of Shakespeare’s plays. From the nineteenth century onwards, Macbeth has often been performed by companies as a special attraction when business was going badly. This is one of the reasons why actors consider it bad luck to quote from the play, or to mention it by name, especially inside the theatre – they always refer to it as ‘the Scottish play’.

Shakespeare took the story from the Chronicles (1577), a history written mainly by Raphael Holinshed and known by his name, ‘Holinshed’. He in turn had taken the story from the work of a Scottish historian called Hector Boyce, writing about fifty years earlier. Though Shakespeare develops the story in his own way, and invents a good deal, the central characters and events were closely based on actual history. King James I of England (who was also King James VI of Scotland), for example, was proud to count both Banquo and King Duncan among his ancestors.

The central theme of the play is the destruction caused when an ambitious man usurps power and undermines social and political order. In the process, moral and spiritual order are also seriously attacked, but in the end, order is restored under a wise, strong and legitimate king. It is likely that Shakespeare wrote the play partly as a compliment to King James and as a celebration of that ordered rule which had very nearly been destroyed by the Gunpowder Plot.

Two difficulties which modern audiences sometimes have with this play concern the witches and the ghosts or apparitions, and these need some comment. In the case of the ghost of Banquo and the apparitions apparently conjured up by the witches, our difficulty need not be so great – if we do not believe in ghosts or visions, we can respond to these things as if they were hallucinations or delusions on Macbeth’s part, caused by a guilty conscience or a vivid imagination. There are, however, people in the West who do believe in such phenomena, or who think that there might possibly be such things.

As far as witches are concerned, the position is more complicated. Belief in witchcraft is widely distributed in human society, past and present. Records of such beliefs go back to probably the prehistoric period, though some people (e.g. the Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert) do not have a belief in witchcraft. Generally witches are thought to be strange, abnormal people who use what they believe to be supernatural means in order to achieve some harmful, evil ends. Some societies, however, recognise ‘white’ witchcraft, the use of such powers for beneficial aims such as curing the sick. Witches are often blamed as the cause of things going wrong – e.g. for illnesses or untimely deaths, or the failure of crops.

Some people in Shakespeare’s time thought that the beliefs about witches were simply superstitions. Others, like King James I himself, at first doubted but later appeared to be convinced that witches did have extraordinary and evil powers. He was very interested in the subject and wrote a book on it called Demonology (1597; published in England 1603). Most people in those days, however, did believe in the evil power of witches, who were thought to be the earthly representatives of the Prince of Evil. An Act of Parliament of 1604 made the practice of witchcraft an offence punishable by death. The campaign against witches was waged relentlessly, by Catholics and by Protestants, for centuries. It was not until the more secular philosophy of the modern world began to emerge from the late seventeenth century onwards that the European witch-craze died down. Many innocent women must have been killed over the centuries, however. There are still reports of traditional witchcraft practices and beliefs in Western societies in recent years.

Whatever we think of witchcraft, one thing is clear about Macbeth: Shakespeare does not put the blame for what happens on the witches. They have a keen interest and delight in encouraging human evil, but Shakespeare shows that evil is really in certain human beings themselves. Supernatural powers and their human agents can encourage this human evil to flourish, but they do not create it. The witches foretell the future – Macbeth, briefly, makes it.

Language and structure

Shakespeare telescopes the events of the play into what seems a short space of time, and the play has a very tight structure. We see Macbeth at the beginning and end of the play as a soldier – at the beginning he is a hero, loyal to the rightful king, and part of a system of order. At the end, however, he is a hated tyrant who has killed the rightful king, dispossessed his heir, killed others who would be in his way, and reduced the ordered kingdom to terror and anarchy. He is also, at the end, no longer part of a coherent society, but instead he is alone.

The first movement of the play is triggered by the prophecies of the witches – that Macbeth will be Thane of Glamis (as he is), Thane of Cawdor, and king hereafter, and that Banquo, though not becoming king himself, will be father to a line of kings. The
prophecies add to what Macbeth has evidently already been thinking and help to impel him to the various actions of killing the king and having Banquo murdered. The second meeting with the witches also contains three prophecies — that Macbeth is to beware Macduff; that he should not fear anyone born of woman; and that he would be safe until Birnam Wood moves to Dunsinane. His reactions to the second set of prophecies lead to his downfall and death.

The witch scenes are therefore important in relating the two movements of the play, but the turning-point of the plot is the banquet scene. Macbeth here briefly is able to act the part of king. The murder of Banquo should have made him secure, but ironically it is this which leads him to give himself away. Though Macbeth is able to gain control of himself eventually, it is too late, and though Lady Macbeth is still strong and determined, it is for the last time. There can be no looking back for him, and he determines that he has no choice but to go on killing.

It has been said that the play has some of the symbolic force of a morality play, and this is true. Yet the characters are not personifications of abstract virtues or vices, but living human beings, and sometimes very complex ones. Instead the symbolic force springs from the formal structure — what we have is a tight pattern of cause and effect, with every action leading to consequences which in turn have further results. The structure gives a sense of inevitability to the play, with nothing irrelevant and yet everything seeming natural in its place. Everything springs from the character of Macbeth himself and its impact, in action, upon those around him. The short scenes which occur from time to time, e.g. between Ross and the Old Man, or between the doctor and the gentlewoman, serve as a commentary on what has been happening, and enable us to see the events as part of a universal context.

The language of the play is particularly memorable for several related groups of images which powerfully help to achieve the presentation of the themes of the play. Especially noticeable are the following: images of clothing, particularly pointing to the difference between external appearance and the reality beneath, and sometimes implying that the clothes are too big for the wearer; images of bloodshed, and the attempts to wash away blood; images of sleep and sleeplessness; images of food and of banquets; images of disorder in the worlds of animals; images of health and disease.

The themes

The major themes of Macbeth are as follows: the sanctity of rightful kingship; the destructive nature of usurpation; the inwardly as well as outwardly destructive nature of evil (i.e. that it destroys the evildoer as well as his victims); the correspondence between order and disorder in the state, in nature, and in individuals; the justifiable killing of the usurper.

Summary of the plot

Macbeth and Banquo are generals in the army of Duncan, King of Scotland. They have just defeated an army of Norwegian invaders and Scottish rebels. They meet three witches, who greet Macbeth as Thane of Cawdor and 'king hereafter'. The witches tell Banquo that although he will not be king himself, he will be the father of many kings. The witches vanish, and news comes that Duncan has made Macbeth Thane of Cawdor, in place of the former Thane, who has proved to be a traitor.

Macbeth writes to tell Lady Macbeth of his adventures and the witches' prophecies about his future, and about the new title Duncan has given him. She starts to plan Duncan's death.

Duncan decides to spend the night at Macbeth's castle. Macbeth's own ambition, and the fact that the witches' prophecy came true, lead him to give in to his wife's persuasion and to kill the sleeping king. The king's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, are suspected, and run away, and Macbeth is crowned king.

Macbeth determines to defeat the witches' prophecy concerning Banquo's children. He therefore tries to have Banquo and his son Fleance killed while they are out riding, but Fleance escapes.

The ghost of the murdered Banquo appears at Macbeth's banquet to haunt him, and he decides to consult the witches again. They tell him to beware of Macduff, Thane of Fife; that no one born of woman can harm him; and that he will never be defeated until Birnam Wood moves to Dunsinane. He therefore believes that fate is on his side.

On learning that Macduff has gone to England, to raise an army to come back and fight him, Macbeth kills Lady Macduff and her children. Lady Macbeth goes mad and dies, and Macbeth is alone. The attacking army led by Malcolm and Macduff cut branches from the trees in Birnam Wood and use them as camouflage as they walk to Dunsinane — so that it looks as though the wood itself is moving, as the prophecy foretold. Macbeth goes to fight Macduff, who reveals that he was not born in the normal way but by 'Caesarisean section' (i.e. 'untimely ripped' from the womb) — thus the last prophecy comes true. Macduff kills Macbeth and Malcolm becomes King of Scotland.