Introduction to Macbeth

Date and Sources

According to history, Macbeth's reign spanned the period between 1040 and 1057. Apparently he was a good king who passed many progressive laws. Shakespeare, however, paints quite a different portrait of Macbeth. Shakespeare's primary source for the play was a contemporary historical text known as Holinshead's Chronicles (1577). From Holinshead's, however, Shakespeare uses little more than the names of the characters and some very basic elements of plot.

The play did not appear in print until 1623. Some scholars believe that it was performed for King James in 1606, but no clear evidence to support this has been found. The play, as it has come down to us, may have involved more than one author. It is generally believed that the witches' scenes were added to the original play by Thomas Middleton.

The Appeal of Macbeth

Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's most popular tragedies. Perhaps this is because of its length. At 2107 lines, it is Shakespeare's shortest tragedy. Hamlet, by the way, is 3924 lines long.

Macbeth is also one of Shakespeare's most violent tragedies. There are over 100 references to bloodshed in this play, and the number of dead bodies that are carried off the stage is truly staggering.

The Witches also add an element to the play that has contributed to its popularity. We, like the Elizabethans, continue to be intrigued by witchcraft and magic. We see in the play Macbeth a contemporary morality play warning us of the dangers of trafficking with "the instruments of darkness."

Shakespeare's Verse and Prose

Many students find Shakespeare difficult to read and understand. They often ask whether or not the Elizabethans really spoke the way Shakespeare's characters do. The answer is, of course, no. Shakespeare writes using a poetic form known as blank verse. This produces an elevated style, which would have been very different from everyday speech during the Elizabethan period.

Furthermore, the blank verse contains a rhythm pattern known as iambic pentameter. What this means is that most lines contain five feet (pentameter) and each foot contains an unstressed and a stressed syllable (an iamb). In other words, as Shakespeare wrote, playing in the back of his mind was a rhythm pattern that would sound like:

da DA da DA da DA da DA da DA

Introduction to Macbeth
The following stage directions appear: (are added by the director: 1974, SIR WILLIAM DERAMORE (in centre)

 Heard into a variety of art forms -

In terms of stress and unstressed

"Voodoo" mask in front with

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