

Macbeth

Yesterday, Today, and To morrow,
and to morrow and to morrow

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November, 1997

History's Most Famous Ghost Story

(1. The Play's Genre)

At its heart, Macbeth is just a ghost story. But it is also a tragedy in the grandest sense: like the Greek tragedies, Macbeth contains great lyrical passages of poetry, mythological or heroic elements affecting a man's destiny, and most of all, an attempt by the protagonist to discover what his role in the cosmic design is. Like Oedipus, Macbeth is punished by the Fates for circumstances that propelled so quickly out of his control, he was hardly aware that it was his hand that began the maelstrom.

Written around 1605, Macbeth is a symbolic vision of the dark, corrupt Jacobean world of the present monarch James I, himself a witch hunter in the latter part of the sixteenth century. It serves as signpost for the type of revenge tragedy that would become popular during James' reign: a true Jacobean tragedy. It is a tragedy with moments of both high and low comedy. It is a morality play, clearly borrowing on the allegorical dramas in the medieval tradition, while also displaying a clearly humanist ideal in The Macbeths' desire to move up the social ladder (at all costs): an idea that would have been laughable one hundred years earlier.

A Play Fit For A King

(3. Historical Production & 5. The Cultural Context of the play's first Production(s))

When Elizabeth I died, childless, she named James IV of Scotland as the successor to the throne of England. He became James I. James had been a witch-hunter in Scotland and in 1597 his book Demonology was published. Contemporary audiences would have known not only that James' interest in witches was a nearly fanatical one, but also that his conception of witches and witchcraft differed significantly from their own. The typical English witch did little more than conjure potions for good or evil, curse crops or livestock, and sour milk. They were homely creatures to be avoided, not necessarily feared. In Scotland, however, witches were far more threatening. They flew, made deals with Satan, held perverse ceremonies, and possessed supernatural powers. So, when Shakespeare's play was performed (first in the Court Theatres, later in the Public Theatres), contemporary Elizabethan audiences understood that the visions of demonic influences depicted in the play were flattering examples of the new monarch's vision, not their own.

Based on a story found in Raphael Holinshed's The History of Scotland, Shakespeare's play makes a few editorial emendations. In the historical story, Banquo joined with Macbeth in the killing of Duncan. Wisely, Shakespeare shifted Banquo, King James' ancestor, away from any criminal goings-on. James also believed himself to be descended spiritually from the long line of English kings and contemporary Elizabethan audiences would have believed that their monarch was God's chosen messenger on Earth. This belief in the divine right of Kings makes Macbeth's regicide even more heinous. To a present-day audience member in 1997, the murder of King

Duncan has none of the religious implications it had in the early 1600's. These precepts were at the very foundation of day-to-day life in Jacobean London.

In addition, certain political concepts found themselves into the play as well. The Porter seems himself as the gatekeeper to hell and welcomes all "equivicators" to the castle. The Gunpowder Plot was a conspiracy to blow up the houses of Parliament, and assassinate James I. When conspirators Henry Garnet and Guy Fawkes were arrested and questioned, they spoke of the Doctrine of Equivocation, which permitted a Catholic to commit perjury in a morally acceptable cause. Scarcely an adult in the audience could have missed the Porter's allusion at the time. Henry Garnet has, alas, become a footnote in history (and in term papers), but Guy Fawkes has passed into myth and is celebrated every November 5, the day the Gunpowder Plot was detected. (Epstein, pg. 426)

The earliest production that I can find record of, occurred in August of 1606 at Hampton Court. James was there, entertaining his brother-in-law, King Christian of Denmark. But before long the play would become one the most popular of all by the most popular dramatist of his time. Though popular in the private theatres, the play would find its home at The Globe. The Globe Theatre was an open-air, public theatre, a 20-sided polygon that was 99 ft. in diameter. Galleries in three levels ran the perimeter of the space, and a 74-ft. wide yard below allowed spectators to stand directly in front of the stage. The stage itself, raised 4 to 6 feet to improve the view for standing spectators, featured several areas for the actors to perform. The entire playing area was roofed, to protect the actors from the elements, and also to house machinery and special effects. (Brockett, pg. 168) Above the main stage was a balcony (The Heavens), and above that was a second balcony reserved for the musicians. Trap doors allowed characters to emerge from below (Hell), and two doors provided entrances and exits off either side of the stage. Although many other types of entertainment were available (including fairs, sporting events, and street exhibitions), the theatre was by far the most frequently attended entertainment chosen by Londoners by 1611.

King James had appropriated the group of actors known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men and, soon afterwards Shakespeare, Burbage and the rest (newly re-christened as the King's Men) found a home at the Globe. Shakespeare owed more than just his civic pride to the King, he owed his professional livelihood.

Out Heroding Herod

(4. Acting Styles of the original production(s))

Though several productions of the play were likely performed between August 1606 and April of 1611, the next contemporary evidence of the play comes from the diary of a Dr. Simon Forman, who attended a performance at The Globe, on April 20, 1611. Using portions of it as our guide, let's take a look at what one audience member saw on one sunny Saturday afternoon in 1611. Contemporary evidence states that Richard Burbage played Hamlet, Othello, and Lear for The King's Men; it seems likely that he also originated Macbeth. (Braunmuller, pg. 35) Jacobean audience complemented Burbage on his naturalism and pathos in tragic roles, but what naturalism meant to a Jacobean audience is unclear. (It is also assumed that John Rice, a gifted young actor, played Lady Macbeth, but the rest of the cast list is lost to history. For now.)

Dr. Forman writes:

In Macbeth at the Globe,...there was to be observed...how Macbeth and Banquo... [came upon] 3 women fairies or nymphs, and [they] saluted Macbeth.

The Witches don't seem to scare Forman very much, so it seems likely that the Boys weren't attired in fantastic costumes. Perhaps the actors stayed close to the English interpretation of a witch? Once out of the Court Theatres, it seems likely that the King's Men would need to give the kind of show an English audience wanted to see.

And so they departed & came to the court of Scotland, to Duncan, king of Scots.... And Macbeth contrived to kill Duncan, & through the persuasion of his wife did that night murder the king in his own castle, being his guest.

And so we arrive at Rice's Lady Macbeth. It seems clear that Rice's Lady M was a very forceful character and this scene left a considerable impression on Forman, he only speaks of Lady M once again, in an afterthought about her death scene. But my favourite description concerns the appearance of Banquo's Ghost, and in it, we get a little glimpse of the staging of this particularly thorny scene.

The next night, being at supper with his [Macbeth's] noblemen whom he had bid to a feast to the which also Banquo should have come, he began to speak of noble Banquo, and to wish that he were there. And as he thus did, standing up to drink a carouse to him, the ghost of Banquo came and sat down in his chair behind him. And he turning about to sit down again saw the ghost of Banquo, which fronted him so, that he fell into a great passion of fear and fury.

Wow. Since Forman doesn't speak of any machinery involved, I assume that Banquo simply entered through one of the doors at stage level and proceeded to sit down casually in Macbeth's chair. For me, the inherent low comedy of Macbeth nearly sitting down on the Ghost is a priceless look at how talented actors of the day could balance the high emotional intensity of this scene, with the physical schtick that would have riveted the groundlings. "A great passion of fear and fury": surely this stands as confirmation that actors of the day employed large physical and vocal tactics to entertain an audience.

The Bard on the Boards

(2. Critical approaches through the ages & 7. Revivals)

Though written in 1605-06, Macbeth did not see print in any form until the First Folio was published in 1623. Nevertheless it seems to have been an enormously popular play, and would seem to have echoes in contemporary works by John Webster (The White Devil, 1612), Thomas Middleton (The Puritan, 1607), Francis Beaumont (The Knight of the Burning Pestle, 1608), and William Killebrew (The Conspiracy, 1635).

On stage, the play has gone through several transformations in an effort to please each generation's sense of truth and (damn those unities!) decorum. Throughout the production history of this play *The Witches* and *The Porter* seem to suffer the most drastic consequences of an editor's pen. Until well into the mid-eighteenth-century the witches were treated solely as comic relief - complete with checkered costumes, high crowned hat, and performing various song-and-dance routines to please the local populace.

A promptbook circa 1625-35 survives (referred to as the "Padua" promptbook due to its present home in the University of Padua Library), and is actually a copy of the First Folio with several pre-Restoration emendations. Most notably, *The Porter* has been cut (a frequent casualty), along with Macbeth's powerful soliloquy on "the sere, the yellow leaf", among other cuts. The Padua Promptbook is also the first document to specify a "Cauldron" for the witches in Act 4, scene 1. (Braunmuller, pg. 43)

In 1666, William Davenant's adaptation becomes the authority until David Garrick's productions in 1744. In Davenant's *Macbeth*, the Witches are treated as comic relief, and Samuel Pepys reported how much he had enjoyed the singing and dancing! (Parsons & Mason, pg. 124) A "Smock Alley" promptbook survives, which seems to have been heavily influenced by the posthumous publishing of Davenant's script in 1674. In it, *The Porter* remains (though heavily cut), and *Lady Macbeth*, removed from Act 3, scene 2 in Davenant's version, has been restored to a more prominent position.

On January 7, 1744 David Garrick made his debut in the title role. Published at the same time, "An Essay on Acting. . . of a certain fashionable actor. . . [with] a short criticism on his acting of *Macbeth*" (Braunmuller, pg. 44), was a pamphlet apparently used by Mr. Garrick to lampoon the acting traditions as he saw them. His rival was an actor named James Quin, and the pamphlet attacks Quin's *Macbeth* by using Garrick's character choices as a "How-To" model, leaving no room open for interpretation. In addition, the essay gives us an extraordinary look at how one of the most famous actors in history approached the role. Returning largely to the First Folio, Garrick's *Macbeth* attempted to restore Shakespeare's play to its pre-Restoration greatness. In two passages, the pamphlet gives us a play-by-play of two of *Macbeth*'s most famous moments on stage: the invisible dagger, and the appearance of Banquo's Ghost. Of Act 2, scene 2, it says:

. . . he [the actor playing Macbeth] should not rivet his Eyes to an imaginary Object, as if it really was there, but should shew an unsettled Motion in his eye, like one not quite awak'd from some disordering Dream; his hands and fingers should not be immovable, but restless. . . Come let me clutch thee! is not to be done by one Motion only, but by several successive Catchers at it, first with one Hand, and then with the other. . . This would make the Spectator's Blood run cold, and he would almost feel the Agonies of the murderer himself. (Braunmuller, pg. 45)

This is naturalistic? He was equally unhappy with current fashion toward *Macbeth*'s response to Banquo's Ghost. The essay goes on to say:

. . . the Glass of Wine in his Hand should not be dash'd upon the Ground, but it should fall gently from him, and he should not discover the least Consciousness of having such a Vehicle in his

Hand, his Memory being quite lost in the present Guilt and Horror of the Imagination.
(Braunmuller, pg. 46)

In the full powdered wig of the times Garrick exploded upon the theatre scene and changed it forever. Though the production was unmistakably Garrick's his script did feature several of Davenant's cuts. Garrick also had Macbeth die *onstage* and even wrote himself a few lines as a final aria:

*'Tis done! the scene of life will quickly close.
Ambition's vain, delusive dreams are fled,
And now I wake to darkness, guilt and horror;
I cannot bear it! let me shake it off -
'Two'not be; my soul is clogg'd with blood -
I cannot rise! I dare not ask for mercy -
It is too late, hell drags me down; I sink,
I sink - Oh! - my soul is lost for ever!
Oh!*

Garrick came closer to Dr. Faustus than even Shakespeare. And how they got his head off, I don't know.

Along with Garrick we have our first substantial writings about the actress playing Lady Macbeth. Hannah Pritchard was Garrick's Lady M, and they were so effective together that he effectively abandoned the role after her retirement. (Braunmuller, pg. 46) Now *that's* some high praise.

Our next important Macbeth was another actor/manager named John Phillip Kemble. Beginning in at least 1794, Kemble, like Garrick, presented a Macbeth that still had many of the Restoration-era cuts and emendations. Though the three sisters were played straight this time, neoclassical ideals were thrown out the window in favour of spectacle, sometimes employing a chorus of fifty or more singing, dancing, comic witches as backup to Shakespeare's action. Lady Macduff, her son and the Porter vanish, but Kemble had something nobody had before: Sara Siddons as the Lady herself. Kemble was sometimes seen as a secondary actor onstage next to Mrs. Siddons, though the change in status between the two characters happened during the Banquet. Kemble (perhaps inspired by Mr. Quin) violently threw his cup of wine upon seeing the Ghost. However by the time Kemble opened Macbeth at Drury Lane on 21 April 1794 (with Edmund Kean as one of the goblins), the Ghost of Banquo had become invisible.

The theatrical and critical history of Macbeth sometimes duplicates, unconsciously, changing attitudes towards women and the relations of women and men. (Braunmuller, pg. 40) Though Garrick had restored the witches to a more sinister position, they still sang and danced, and by the early 1800's the typical audience member expected that they would. As the position of the witches diminished, however, the focus shifted to Lady Macbeth as the sole virago responsible for Macbeth's downfall.

By the mid 1800's, Macbeth was perceived as a bit of a whiner, Lady Macbeth as a loving wife who does the best she can, and The Porter becomes the center of a major literary debate. George Fletcher wrote against the elimination of the Porter and of Lady M's absence from Act 2, scene 3, essentially calling for a more Folio-like production. Fletcher praised the actress Helen Faucit's Lady Macbeth and hailed it as a new "essentially feminine" portrayal. (Whatever *that* means.) William Charles Macready played Mr. Macbeth to Faucit's Mrs., to some success. Always his worst critic, Macready attempted to meld the "old" heroic Macbeth of the Restoration, with the "new" kinder, gentler Macbeth of the Victorian Age. Later, however, he played to the American actress Susan Cushman, who took Lady M back to the fiendish termagant she once was. One of her pupils, Henry Irving, became the first theatre knight, and was the toast of the Edwardian theatre scene. In 1888 Irving began working opposite Ellen Terry, a very feminine Lady Macbeth. Her Lady M was panned, and she was accused of whitewashing the character by accenting her more tender side.

Just as before, as Lady M diminishes in scope, the witches pick up the slack. Though the weird sisters were restored as supernatural beings of mystery and demonic prowess, it was achieved by a steady increase in the spectacle that followed them. Cranes, smoke, and now (thank you, Thomas Edison) lights, helped the witches remain the most memorable part of any revival, culminating in the spectacular designs and machinations of Herbert Beerbohm Tree, theatre's *second* knight. With the advent of so many new special effects, the witches became omnipresent witnesses throughout the play. By the time of Orson Welles' famous Voodoo Macbeth, the witches were no longer just soothsayers, they had become demons responsible for the hero's downfall.

In the twentieth century several productions have gained notoriety. Laurence Olivier and his then wife Vivian Leigh were paired as the couple in 1955, to great success. Olivier's Macbeth was said to be "[perhaps] the best since William Charles Macready's", and the duo were praised for showing that Mr. and Mrs. Maccers were genuinely in love with one another before all the madness began. In 1976, and again in 1994, the Royal Shakespeare Company produced stagings of the play with increasingly less spectacle and bravura performances from Sir Ian McKellan and Dame Judi Dench (1976), and Sir Derek Jacobi (1994).

The play has continued to excite and inspire. And frighten.

Canon Fodder

(6. Historical Importance & Superstition)

One thing I've purposefully avoided in this paper is discussing Shakespeare's language, perhaps the most important reason for the play's enormous popularity through the years. The play is so rich with other things to talk about: hubris, sex, politics (on and off stage), witchcraft and superstition (to name a few.) But of all the elements that make up this classic work, it's Shakespeare's use of language that I feel deems it worthy of all the praise it has so rightly earned over the years. It's also the most difficult to talk about.

It is estimated that Shakespeare used between 25,000 and 29,000 *different* words in his plays and poems. (The King James Bible is only made up of about 6,000 different words.) (Epstein, pg.

224) And it is said that he created over 17,000 words. The world was changing so quickly for Shakespeare's audiences, and Macbeth is the perfect example of a culture on the brink. Finding it harder and harder to cling to antiquated, medieval ideals, an Elizabethan/ Jacobean audience would have intuitively understood the way Macbeth struggles to make sense of the world around *him*. Latin-based words and images needed to give way to a nationalistic Anglo-Saxon tongue in the marketplace, and here on the stage Shakespeare exploited that struggle to its limit. The most famous instance is, of course, Macbeth's soliloquy following the murder of King Duncan:

*this my Hand will rather
The multitudinous Seas incarnadine,
Making the Greene one, Red.*

In his mind, the Thane is trying to make sense of a world out of his control. His mind (multitudinous, incarnadine) fights against his instinct (Hand, Seas, Greene, Red) for control. Shakespeare's mastery at revealing character through language is at its tight-fisted best in this, one of his shortest plays.

Another reason that the play belongs in the canon is the sheer incantative power of its title and the trail of curses that follow it. To speak the title character's name inside a theatre is the ultimate in foolhardiness. (I know. I paid that price. More on that later.) For four hundred years it's been associated with tragedy offstage as well. In 1606 Hal Berridge, possibly the second actor to play Lady Macbeth, died backstage. On 10 May 1849, Charles Macready and the American actor Edwin Forrest offered dueling Macbeths in New York City, an event that erupted into riots in which 20 people died. In 1934 one production went through *four* Macbeths before finishing its run. In 1938 Lady Macbeth ran her car through a store window. In 1937 Olivier actually wounded his Macduff in the final scene. And in 1996, after repeating *That Word* several times backstage, I was struck in the head by a falling broom during a performance, slicing a wound in my forehead that eventually required 10 stitches. After the show.

But my favourite tale (gather closer around the campfire everybody) involves Orson Welles' ambitious revival of the play in 1936. The "Voodoo" Macbeth featured an all-black cast, including actual witch doctors from Haiti, where Welles, as director, had set the play. The New York Herald-Tribune writer Percy Hammond panned the production. That night, manic drumming was reported to have been heard from inside the theatre, where the doctors had set up camp. The next day Mr. Hammond fell ill.

He never recovered.

8. My Assessment

It is time to produce Macbeth again. But this time it needs an angle to get the typical American couch potato off the couch and into the theatre. It needs to be a Macbeth that the lowest common denominator of society can identify with.

The Trailer Park Macbeth.

Duncan owns a trailer park. Macbeth wants it and his domineering wife (always in a housecoat and slippers) wants the extra cash the park will bring in. The Three Sisters are hags with a baby on the breast and another on the way. The final battle with Macduff is done with all found objects: a crowbar, a trash can lid, etc.

Camp? Partly, but the American theatre needs a bit of irreverence and this is it. Shakespeare's language is rich and should not be cut or toned down. Remember this is one of Shakespeare's shortest plays. It runs like a greyhound and a little bit of self-satire is just what will get an audience in to see. They are afraid of the classics. This is a great way to introduce them to the luxurious sounds of Shakespeare's play. Just as in Elizabethan times, these plays would have been staged with everyday clothing; blue jeans and slippers won't turn an audience away the way that one cod piece will.

The show could have the potential to be a groundbreaking critical and financial success.

Thank you,

Brian McKnight.

To mankind in general Macbeth and Lady Macbeth stand out as the supreme type of all that a host and hostess should *not* be.

- Max Beerbohm

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