

MACBETH



Macbeth is a study of a tyrant's mind. What Shakespeare does in this play is to tackle the problem of how a man progresses from being a war hero into being a tyrant.

On hearing the witches' prophecy that he will be king, Macbeth says, "If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me, / Without my stir." It is Lady Macbeth who persuades him to give Fate a push

Macbeth sits uneasily on the throne, his insecurity leading him from one murder to the next, as he treads, in the words of the Porter, "...the primrose way to the everlasting bonfire."

SUPERSTITION

The play has a feeling of evil about it. It is full of horror. There is an old theatrical superstition that there is a "curse" on the play. It is considered bad luck to quote from Macbeth, or even to mention the name of the play.

EQUIVOCATION

Equivocation is a major theme. An equivocator is one who deceives by choosing words so carefully that they have an alternative meaning. In their predictions, the witches tell Macbeth that he will never be vanquished until Burnham Wood comes to his castle at Dunsinane. They also tell him that "none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth." Macbeth takes these statements as assurances that his power is unassailable – failing to foresee Malcolm's concern to camouflage his troops, nor being aware of the unusual circumstances of Macduff's arrival into the world by a caesarian operation.

Macbeth lives long enough to curse the equivocation of these "...juggling fiends... / That palter with us in a double sense; / That keep the word of promise to our ear, / And break it to our hope."



THE DIVINE RIGHT OF KINGS

The King's right to govern was believed to come from God. The murder of a king is not just an ordinary murder – it is sacrilege. Macbeth's crime upsets the natural order, the Great Chain of Being, giving rise to unnatural occurrences and portents.

THE PORTER SCENE

Shakespeare often uses comedy to emphasize his themes. Here, as in other plays, he puts the most direct statement of the play's themes into the mouth of a so-called "low-life" character. The Porter of Macbeth's castle, suffering from a hangover, likens drink to an equivocator with lechery: "It provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance...it makes him, and it mars him..."

CONTRASTS

The witches both "make" and "mar" Macbeth with their equivocal predictions. The Porter's speech contains a long list of opposites: provokes/unprovokes, desire/performance, makes/mars, sets on/takes off/ persuades/ disheartens, etc. These antitheses run through the play – there are over four hundred of them. Macbeth's first line contains one: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen." He is referring to the bad weather and the victory in battle, but his words are also an unconscious comment on the good news/bad news he is about to receive from the witches.

BLOOD

There are constant references to blood in the play, both in the literal sense when we see it onstage and in the blood metaphors which pervade the speech of all the characters.