

Macbeth

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Van Doren presents a broad survey of *Macbeth*, asserting that Shakespeare's triumph lies in his construction of a strange, dark, and shapeless world which from the outset pits itself against the protagonist. Ironically, Macbeth himself represents the ever-changing form and shape of this bizarre world, the critic notes, for his own wavering over whether or not to kill Duncan is a predominant trait of his character. Van Doren also discusses the figure of Lady Macbeth, arguing that because she is less imaginative than her husband, her mind cannot withstand the torture of guilt as long as Macbeth's does. The critic also briefly examines some important symbols in *Macbeth*—including fear, blood, and sleep—but focuses chiefly on the representation of time and death. According to Van Doren, time—an element fundamental to human experience—goes awry and disintegrates Macbeth's world. Consequently, the hero develops a pessimistic view of death as merely an extension of the inexorable and eternal passage of time. The critic also discusses Duncan's dramatic function in *Macbeth*, observing that many of his characteristics directly contradict those of Macbeth. In addition, Malcolm and Macduff bring order and healing to Macbeth's strange and shapeless world, and with their return "blood will cease to flow, movement will recommence, fear will be forgotten, sleep will season every life, and the seeds of time will blossom in due order."

The brevity of *Macbeth* is so much a function of its brilliance that we might lose rather than gain by turning up the lost scenes of legend. This brilliance gives us in the end somewhat less than the utmost that tragedy can give. The hero, for instance, is less valuable as a person than Hamlet, Othello, or Lear; or Antony, or Coriolanus, or Timon. We may not rejoice in his fall as Dr. [Samuel] Johnson says we must, yet we have known too little about him and have found too little virtue in him to experience at his death the sense of an unutterable and tragic loss made necessary by ironies beyond our understanding. He commits murder in violation of a nature which we can assume to have been noble, but we can only assume this. Macbeth has surrendered his soul before the play begins. When we first see him he is already invaded by those fears which are to render him vicious and which are finally to make him abominable. They will also reveal him as a great poet. But his poetry, like the poetry of the play, is to be concerned wholly with sensation and catastrophe. *Macbeth* like *Lear* is all end; the difference appearing in the speed with which doom rushes down, so that this rapidest of tragedies suggests whirlwinds rather than glaciers, and in the fact that terror rather than pity is the mode of the accompanying music. *Macbeth*, then, is not in the fullest known sense a tragedy. But we do not need to suppose that this is because important parts of it have been lost. More of it would have had to be more of the same. And the truth is that no significant scene seems to be missing. *Macbeth* is incomparably brilliant as it stands, and within its limits perfect. What it does it does with flawless force. It hurls a universe against a man, and if the universe that strikes is more impressive than the man who is stricken, great as his size and gaunt as his soul may be, there is no good reason for doubting that this is what Shakespeare intended. The triumph of *Macbeth* is the construction of a world, and nothing like it has ever been constructed in twenty-one hundred lines.

This world, which is at once without and within Macbeth, can be most easily described as strange. The word, like the witches, is always somewhere doing its work. Even in the battle which precedes the play the thane of Glamis has made 'strange images of death' [I. iii. 97], and when he comes home to his lady his face is 'as a book where men may read strange matters' [I. v. 62-3]. Duncan's horses after his murder turn wild in nature and devour each other—'a thing most strange and certain' [II. iv. 14]. Nothing is as it should be in such a world. 'Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?' [V. i. 39-40]. There is a drift of disorder in all events, and the air is murky with unwelcome miracles.

It is a dark world too, inhabited from the beginning by witches who meet on a blasted heath in thunder and lightning, and who hover through fog and filthy air as they leave on unspeakable errands. It is a world wherein

'men must not walk too late' [III. vi. 7], for the night that was so pretty in *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Merchant of Venice* has grown terrible with ill-smelling mists and the stench of blood. The time that was once a playground for free and loving spirits has closed like a trap, or yawned like a bottomless pit. The 'dark hour' that Banquo borrows from the night is his last hour on an earth which has lost the

distinction between sun and gloom.

Darkness does the face of earth entomb,

When living light should kiss it.

[II. iv. 9-10]

The second of these lines makes a sound that is notable in the play for its rarity: the sound of life in its normal ease and lightness. Darkness prevails because the witches, whom Banquo calls its instruments, have willed to produce it. But Macbeth is its instrument too, as well as its victim. And the weird sisters no less than he are expressions of an evil that employs them both and has roots running farther into darkness than the mind can guess.

It is furthermore a world in which nothing is certain to keep its shape. Forms shift and consistencies alter, so that what was solid may flow and what was fluid may congeal to stone.

The earth hath bubbles, as the water has,

And these are of them,

[I. iii. 79-80]

says Banquo of the vanished witches. Macbeth addresses the 'sure and firm set earth' [II. i. 56], but nothing could be less firm than the whole marble and the founded rock he has fancied his life to be. At the very moment he speaks he has seen a dagger which is not there, and the 'strange infirmity' he confesses at the banquet will consist of seeing things that cannot be. His first apostrophe to the witches had been to creatures

That look not like the inhabitants o' the earth,

And yet are on 't.

[I. iii. 41-2]

So now a dead man lives; Banquo's brains are out but he rises again, and 'this is more strange than such a murder is' [III. iv. 81-2].

Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves

Shall never tremble.

[III. iv. 101-02]

But the shape of everything is wrong, and the nerves of Macbeth are never proof against trembling. The cardinal instance of transformation is himself. Bellona's bridegroom has been turned to jelly.

The current of change pouring forever through this universe has, as a last effect, dissolved it. And the dissolution of so much that was solid has liberated deadly fumes, has thickened the air until it suffocates all breathers. If the footing under men is less substantial than it was, the atmosphere they must push through is almost too heavy for life. It is confining, swarming, swelling; it is viscous, it is sticky; and it threatens strangulation. All of the speakers in the play conspire to create the impression that this is so. Not only do the witches in their opening scene wail 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair' [I. i. 11], but the military men who enter after them anticipate in their talk of recent battle the imagery of entanglement to come.

Doubtful it stood,

As two spent swimmers that do cling together

And choke their art....

The multiplying villainies of nature

Do swarm upon him....

So from that spring whence comfort seem'd to come

Discomfort swells.

[I. ii. 7-9; 11-12; 27-8]

Macbeth's sword is reported to have 'smok'd with bloody execution' [I. ii. 18], and he and Banquo were 'as cannons overcharg'd with double cracks' [I. ii. 37]; they

Doubly redoubled strokes upon the foe.

[I. ii. 38]

The hyperbole is ominous, the excess is sinister. In the third scene, after what seemed corporal in the witches has melted into the wind, Ross and Angus join Banquo and Macbeth to report the praises of Macbeth that had

poured in on Duncan 'as thick as hail' [I. iii. 97], and to salute the new thane of Cawdor. The witches then have been right in two respects, and Macbeth says in an aside:

Two truths are told,

As happy prologues to the swelling act

Of the imperial theme.

[I. iii. 127-29]

But the imagined act of murder swells in his mind until it is too big for its place, and his heart beats as if it were choking in its chamber.

Why do I yield to that suggestion

Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair

And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,

Against the use of nature? Present fears

Are less than horrible imaginings.

My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,

Shakes so my single state of man that function

Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is

But what is not.

[I. iii. 134-42]

Meanwhile Lady Macbeth at home is visited by no such fears. When the crisis comes she will break sooner than her husband does, but her brittleness then will mean the same thing that her melodrama means now: she is a slighter person than Macbeth, has a poorer imagination, and holds in her mind less of that power which enables it to stand up under torture. The news that Duncan is coming to her house inspires her to pray that her blood be made thick; for the theme of thickness is so far not terrible in her thought.

Come, thick night,

And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,

That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,

Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark

To cry, 'Hold, hold!'

[I. v. 50-4]

The blanket of the dark—it seems to her an agreeable image, and by no means suggests an element that can enwrap or smother. With Macbeth it is different; his soliloquy in the seventh scene shows him occupied with images of nets and tangles: the consequences of Duncan's death may coil about him like an endless rope.

If it were done when 't is done, then 't were well

It were done quickly. If the assassination

Could trammel up the consequence, and catch

With his surcease success; that but this blow

Might be the be-all and the end-all here,

But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,

We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases

We still have judgement here, that we but teach

Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return

To plague the inventor.

[I. vii. 1-10]

And his voice rises to shrillness as he broods in terror upon the endless echo which such a death may make in

the world.

His virtues

Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongu'd, against

The deep damnation of his taking-off;

And pity, like a naked new-born babe

Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin hors'd

Upon the sightless couriers of the air,

Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,

That tears shall drown the wind.

[I. vii. 18-25]

It is terror such as this that Lady Macbeth must endeavor to allay in what is after all a great mind. Her scolding cannot do so. She has commanded him to screw his courage to the sticking-point, but what is the question that haunts him when he comes from Duncan's bloody bed, with hands that can never be washed white again?

Wherefore could not I pronounce 'Amen'?

I had most need of blessing, and 'Amen'

Stuck in my throat.

[II. ii. 28-30]

He must not consider such things so deeply, his lady warns him. But he does, and in good time she will follow suit. That same night the Scottish earth, shaking in a convincing sympathy as the Roman earth in **Julius Caesar** never shook, considers the grievous state of a universe that suffocates in the breath of its own history. Lamentings are heard in the air, strange screams of death, and prophecies of dire combustion and confused events [II. iii. 56-8]. And the next morning, says Ross to an old man he meets,

By the clock 't is day,

And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp.

[II. iv. 6-7]

Macbeth is now king, but his fears 'stick deep' in Banquo [III. i. 49]. The thought of one more murder that will give him perhaps the 'clearness' he requires [III. i. 132] seems for a moment to free his mind from its old obsessive horror of dusk and thickness, and he can actually invoke these conditions—in the only verse he ever uses with conscious literary intention.

Come, seeling night,

Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day,

And with thy bloody and invisible hand

Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond

Which keeps me pale! Light thickens, and the crow

Makes wing to the rooky wood;

Good things of day begin to droop and drowse,

While night's black agents to their preys do rouse.

[III. ii. 46-53]

The melodrama of this, and its inferiority of effect, may warn us that Macbeth is only pretending to hope. The news of Fleance's escape brings him at any rate his fit again, and he never more ceases to be 'cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd' [III. iv. 23]. He is caught in the net for good, his feet have sunk into quicksands from which they cannot be freed, his bosom like Lady Macbeth's is 'stuff'd' with 'perilous stuff which weighs upon the heart' [V. iii. 44-5]—the figure varies, but the theme does not. A strange world not wholly of his own making has closed around him and rendered him motionless. His gestures are spasmodic at the end, like those of one who knows he is hopelessly engulfed. And every metaphor he uses betrays his belief that the universal congestion is past cure:

What rhubarb, senna, or what purgative drug,

Would scour these English hence?

[V. iii. 55-6]

The answer is none.

The theme never varies, however rich the range of symbols employed to suggest it. One of these symbols is of course the fear that shakes Macbeth as if he were an object not human; that makes him start when the witches call him 'King hereafter,' that sets his heart knocking at his ribs, that wrings from him unsafe extremities of rhetoric, that reduces him to a maniac when Banquo walks again, that spreads from him to all of Scotland until its inhabitants 'float upon a wild and violent sea' of terror [IV. ii. 21], and that in the end, when he has lost the capacity to feel anything any longer, drains from him so that he almost forgets its taste [V. v. 9]. Another symbol, and one that presents itself to several of our senses at once, is blood. Never in a play has there been so much of this substance, and never has it been so sickening. 'What bloody man is that?' [I. ii. 1]. The second scene opens with a messenger running in to Duncan red with wounds. And blood darkens every scene thereafter. It is not bright red, nor does it run freely and wash away. Nor is it a metaphor as it was in *Julius Caesar*. It is so real that we see, feel, and smell it on everything. And it sticks. 'This is a sorry sight,' says Macbeth as he comes from Duncan's murder, staring at his hands [II. ii. 17]. He had not thought there would be so much blood on them, or that it would stay there like that. Lady Macbeth is for washing the 'filthy witness' off, but Macbeth knows that all great Neptune's ocean will not make him clean; rather his hand, plunged into the green, will make it all one red. The blood of the play is everywhere physical in its looks and gross in its quantity. Lady Macbeth 'smears' the grooms with it, so that when they are found they seem 'badg'd' and 'unmannerly breech'd' with gore, and 'steep'd' in the colors of their trade. The murderer who comes to report Banquo's death has blood on his face, and the 'blood-bolter'd Banquo' when he appears shakes 'gory locks' at Macbeth [IV. i. 123], who in deciding upon the assassination has reflected that

I am in blood

Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,

Returning were as tedious as go o'er.

[III. iv. 135-37]

Richard III had said a similar thing, but he suggested no veritable pool or swamp of blood as this man does; and his victims, wailing over their calamities, did not mean the concrete thing Macduff means when he cries, 'Bleed, bleed, poor country!' [IV. iii. 31]. The world of the play quite literally bleeds. And Lady Macbeth, walking in her sleep, has definite stains upon the palms she rubs and rubs. 'Yet here's a spot What, will these hands ne'er be clean? ... Here's the smell of the blood still; all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand' [V. i. 31; 43; 50-1].

A third symbol, of greater potency than either fear or blood, is sleeplessness. Just as there are more terrors in the night than day has ever taught us, and more blood in a man than there should be, so there is less sleep in this disordered world than the minimum which once had been required for health and life. One of the final signs of that disorder is indeed the death of sleep.

Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more!

Macbeth does murder sleep....

Glamis hath murder'd sleep, and therefore Cawdor

Shall sleep no more; Macbeth shall sleep no more.'

[II. ii. 32-3; 39-40]

Nothing that Macbeth says is more terrible than this, and no dissolution suffered by his world is more ominous. For sleep in Shakespeare is ever the privilege of the good and the reward of the innocent. If it has been put to death there is no goodness left. One of the witches knows how to torture sailors by keeping sleep from their pent-house lids [I. iii. 19-20], but only Macbeth can murder sleep itself. The result in the play is an ultimate weariness. The 'restless ecstasy' with which Macbeth's bed is made miserable, and

the affliction of these terrible dreams

That shake us nightly

[III. ii. 18-19]

—such things are dreadful, but his final fatigue is more dreadful still, for it is the fatigue of a soul that has worn itself out with watching fears, wading in blood, and wading to the necessity of new murders for which the hand has no relish. Macbeth's hope that when Macduff is dead he can 'sleep in spite of thunder' [IV. i. 86] is after all no hope. For there is no sleep in Scotland [III. vi. 34], and least of all in a man whose lids have lost the art of closing. And whose heart has lost the power of trembling like a guilty thing.

The time has been, my senses would have cool'd

To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair

Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir

As life were in 't. I have supp'd full with horrors;

Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,

Cannot once start me.

[V. v. 10-15]

Terror has degenerated into tedium, and only death can follow, either for Macbeth who lacks the season of all natures or for his lady who not only walks but talks when she should sleep, and who will not die holily in her bed.

Meanwhile, however, another element has gone awry, and it is one so fundamental to man's experience that Shakespeare has given it a central position among those symbols which express the disintegration of the hero's world. Time is out of joint, inoperative, dissolved. 'The time has been,' says Macbeth, when he could fear; and 'the time has been' that when the brains were out a man would die, and there an end [III. iv. 77-9]. The repetition reveals that Macbeth is haunted by a sense that time has slipped its grooves; it flows wild and formless through his world, and is the deep cause of all the anomalies that terrify him. Certain of these anomalies are local or specific: the bell that rings on the night of the murder, the knocking at the gate, the flight of Macduff into England at the very moment Macbeth plans his death, and the disclosure that Macduff was from his mother's womb untimely ripp'd. Many things happen too soon, so that tidings are like serpents that strike without warning. 'The King comes here tonight,' says a messenger, and Lady Macbeth is startled out of all composure: 'Thou 'rt mad to say it!' [I. v. 31]. But other anomalies are general, and these are the worst. The words of Banquo to the witches:

If you can look into the seeds of time,

And say which grain will grow and which will not,

[I. iii. 58-9]

plant early in the play a conception of time as something which fulfills itself by growing—and which, the season being wrong, can swell to monstrous shape. Or it can find crannies in the mold and extend secret, sinister roots into dark soil that never has known them. Or it can have no growth at all; it can rot and fester in its place, and die. The conception wavers, like the courage of Macbeth, but it will not away. Duncan welcomes Macbeth to Forres with the words:

I have begun to plant thee, and will labour

To make thee full of growing.

[I. iv. 28-9]

But Macbeth, like time itself, will burgeon beyond bounds. 'Nature's germens' will

tumble all together,

Even till destruction sicken.

[IV. i. 59-60]

When Lady Macbeth, greeting her husband, says with excited assurance:

Thy letters have transported me beyond

This ignorant present, and I feel now

The future in the instant,

[I. v. 56-8]

she cannot suspect, nor can he, how sadly the relation between present and future will maintain itself. If the present is the womb or seed-bed of the future, if time is a succession of growths each one of which lives cleanly and freely after the death of the one before it, then what is to prevail will scarcely be recognizable as time. The seed will not grow; the future will not be born out of the present; the plant will not disentangle itself from its bed, but will stick there in still birth.

Thou sure and firm set earth,

Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear

Thy very stones prate of my whereabouts,

And take the present horror from the time,

Which now suits with it,

[II. i. 56-60]

prays Macbeth on the eve of Duncan's death. But time and horror will not suit so neatly through the nights to come; the present moment will look like all eternity, and horror will be smeared on every hour. Macbeth's speech when he comes back from viewing Duncan's body may have been rehearsed and is certainly delivered for effect; yet he best knows what the terms signify:

Had I but died an hour before this chance,

I had liv'd a blessed time; for, from this instant,

There's nothing serious in mortality.

[II. iii. 91-3]

He has a premonition even now of time's disorders; of his own premature descent into the sear, the yellow leaf [V. iii. 23]; of his failure like any other man to

pay his breath

To time and mortal custom.

[IV. i. 99-100]

'What, will the line stretch out to the crack of doom?' he cries when Banquo's eight sons appear to him in the witches' cavern [IV. i. 117]. Time makes sense no longer; its proportions are strange, its content meaningless. For Lady Macbeth in her mind's disease the minutes have ceased to march in their true file and order; her sleep-walking soliloquy [V. i] recapitulates the play, but there is no temporal design among the fragments of the past—the blood, the body of Duncan, the fears of her husband, the ghost of Banquo, the slaughter of Lady Macduff, the ringing of the bell, and again the blood—which float detached from one another in her memory. And for Macbeth time has become

a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,

Signifying nothing.

[V. v. 26-8]

Death is dusty, and the future is a limitless desert of tomorrows. His reception of the news that Lady Macbeth has died is like nothing else of a similar sort in Shakespeare. When Northumberland was told of Hotspur's death he asked his grief to wait upon his revenge:

For this I shall have time enough to mourn.

[**2 Henry IV**, I. i. 136]

And when Brutus was told of Portia's death he knew how to play the stoic:

With meditating that she must die once,

I have the patience to endure it now.

[**Julius Caesar**, IV. iii. 191-92]

But Macbeth, drugged beyond feeling, supped full with horrors, and tired of nothing so much as of coincidence in calamity, can only say in a voice devoid of tone:

She should have died hereafter;

There would have been a time for such a word.

[V. v. 17-18]

There would, that is, if there were such a thing as time. Then such words as 'died' and 'hereafter' would have their meaning. Not now, however, for time itself has died.

Duncan was everything that Macbeth is not. We saw him briefly, but the brilliance of his contrast with the thane he trusted has kept his memory beautiful throughout a play whose every other feature has been hideous. He was 'meek' and 'clear' [I. vii. 17-18], and his mind was incapable of suspicion. The treachery of Cawdor bewildered him:

There's no art

To find the mind's construction in the face.

He was a gentleman on whom I built

An absolute trust

[I. iv. 11-14]

—this at the very moment when Macbeth was being brought in for showers of praise and tears of plenteous joy! For Duncan was a free spirit and could weep, a thing impossible to his murderer's stopped heart. The word 'love' was native to his tongue; he used it four times within the twenty lines of his conversation with Lady Macbeth, and its clear beauty as he spoke it was reflected that night in the diamond he sent her by Banquo [II. i. 15]. As he approached Macbeth's castle in the late afternoon the building had known its only moment of serenity and fairness. It was because Duncan could look at it and say:

This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air

Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself

Unto our gentle senses.

[I. vi. 1-3]

The speech itself was nimble, sweet, and gentle; and Banquo's explanation was in tone:

This guest of summer,

The temple-haunting martlet, does approve,

By his loved masonry, that the heaven's breath

Smells wooingly here; no jutting, frieze,

Buttress, nor coign of vantage, but this bird

Hath made his pendent bed and procreant cradle.

Where they most breed and haunt, I have observ'd

The air is delicate.

[I. vi. 3-10]

Summer, heaven, wooing, and procreation in the delicate air—such words suited the presence of a king who when later on he was found stabbed in his bed would actually offer a fair sight to guilty eyes. His blood was not like the other blood in the play, thick and fearfully discolored. It was bright and beautiful, as no one better than Macbeth could appreciate:

Here lay Duncan,

His silver skin lac'd with his golden blood

[II. iii. 109-10]

—the silver and the gold went with the diamond, and with Duncan's gentle senses that could smell no treachery though a whole house reeked with it. And Duncan of course could sleep. After life's fitful fever he had been laid where nothing could touch him further [III. ii. 22-6]. No terrible dreams to shake him nightly, and no fears of things lest they come stalking through the world before their time in borrowed shapes.

Our memory of this contrast, much as the doings of the middle play work to muffle it, is what gives power to Malcolm and Macduff at the end.

Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell.

[IV. iii. 22]

Scotland may seem to have become the grave of men and not their mother [IV. iii. 166]; death and danger may claim the whole of that bleeding country; but there is another country to the south where a good king works miracles with his touch. The rest of the world is what it always was; time goes on; events stretch out through space in their proper forms. Shakespeare again has enclosed his evil within a universe of good, his storm center within wide areas of peace. And from this outer world Malcolm and Macduff will return to heal Scotland of its ills. Their conversation in London before the pious Edward's palace [IV. iii] is not an interruption of the play; it is one

of its essential parts, glancing forward as it does to a conclusion wherein Macduff can say, 'The time is free' [V. ix. 21], and wherein Malcolm can promise that deeds of justice, 'planted newly with the time,' will be performed 'in measure, time, and place' [V. ix. 31, 39]. Malcolm speaks the language of the play, but he has recovered its lost idiom. Blood will cease to flow, movement will recommence, fear will be forgotten, sleep will season every life, and the seeds of time will blossom in due order. The circle of safety which Shakespeare has drawn around his central horror is thinly drawn, but it is finely drawn and it holds....

- [Macbeth Prepares for Murder \(II. i. 33-64\)](#)
- [Macbeth Hesitates: Lady Macbeth Persuades \(I. vii. 1-83\)](#)

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