



Macbeth

I don't see why the Penguin-books people had to get out Shakespeare's plays in the same size and everything as the detective stories. . . . Anyway, I got real comfy in bed that night and all ready to read a good mystery story and here I had The Tragedy of Macbeth—a book for high-school students. Like Ivanhoe or Lorna Doone.

—From JAMES THURBER's story
"The Macbeth Murder Mystery"

Macbeth is visually dark, a Shakespearean *film noir*. There's only one moment of sunlight, just before Duncan's murder. The rest of the play takes place in shadows, in rain, in storms, at twilight, or in the middle of the night. Because the play is so short, it's dense with the intensity of a fever dream, filled with prophecies, ghosts, daggers hovering in midair, shrieks in the night pitched ever more shrill by a deepening paranoia and dread. Although the story of Macbeth is as exciting as a murder mystery, it's the play's atmosphere, not its plot, that's the thing. For gloomy intensity, there's nothing like it in all of Shakespeare.

The play opens on a "blasted heath," where the air is so filthy and foggy (like the smoky streets of Los Angeles in a classic *film noir*) that one can barely see. Visual obscurity here suggests moral ambiguity,

the boundaries between good and evil incomprehensibly blurred. *Macbeth* depicts a disorienting world where "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." Upon entering this blasted heath, we, along with Macbeth, leave moral guideposts behind us.

Here the three Weird Sisters, like mysterious strangers lurking in a dark alley, wait to give the hero a tip about a future event. For at this point, Macbeth is still a hero, fresh from the battlefield where his valor led to victory. As he passes, the Witches greet him with a repetition of three pronouncements (three being a magical number): The first Witch presents him with a known truth:

All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!

The next, with a possibility that will become true:

All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!

And the last, with a statement that's seemingly beyond his grasp:

All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!

Thus, by degrees, they lead him from the actual to the probable and then, finally, to the seemingly impossible. Upon hearing the final pronouncement, Macbeth's hair becomes "unfix[ed]" and "[his] seated heart knock[s] at [his] ribs."

The central question of the play is whether the Witch's final statement is a warning, a temptation, or a prophecy. The mystery is not, as the woman in Thurber's story thought, a whodunit, but a whocausedit? What role do the Weird Sisters play in Macbeth's fate? "*Wyrd*" meant "fate" in Anglo-Saxon. But the word, as the critic Marvin Rosenberg points out, also suggests "weyward," or "wayward," the Witches being projections of Macbeth's wayward imagination. Do they determine his fate or merely suggest what his ambition craves? Shakespeare thus asks, Are our lives determined by fate or by free will?

The prophecy arouses complex emotions in Lady Macbeth. She is frequently called ambitious, but her aspirations are fired by an intense sexual current. She's concerned not with Macbeth as her husband but with her husband as king. She is compelled by male power, and by

appealing to her husband's manhood, she seduces and humiliates him into doing a deed that at first he only contemplates:

MACBETH. I dare do all that may become a man;

Who dares do more is none.

LADY. What beast wasn't then

That made you break this enterprise to me?

When you durst do it, then you were a man;

And to be more than what you were, you would

Be so much more the man.

(I.7.46-51)

By murdering Duncan, Macbeth violates and disrupts divine, human, and natural laws: he has murdered his king, to whom he owes complete loyalty; his kinsman, whom he should love; and his guest, who deserves his hospitality and protection. And he has killed an innocent man while he lies asleep and defenseless. Most important, Duncan is a wise and a good ruler. Unlike Bolingbroke in *Richard II*, Macbeth has no political or moral excuse for his deed. All of nature revolts against Duncan's murder. By killing the king, who presides over earthly order, Macbeth sets off a chain reaction that unleashes anarchy in heaven and on earth: the eve of Duncan's murder is "unruly" (i.e., unruled); a violent storm suddenly picks up; the earth shakes as if with a fever; Duncan's horses turn wild and eat each other; and prophetic shrieks fill the night air.

After Duncan's murder, Shakespeare creates one of the most harrowing scenes imaginable. Husband and wife, now accomplices, speak in a terse, conspiratorial whisper, the atmosphere one of suppressed hysteria. If they weren't whispering, they'd be screaming.

MACBETH. I have done the deed. Didst thou not hear a
noise?

LADY. I heard the owl-scream and the cricket's cry.

Did not you speak?

MACBETH. When?

LADY. Now.

MACBETH. As I descended?

LADY. Ay.

(II.2.14-16)

Their nerves are so raw, every noise seems like an explosion. Staring at his bloody hands, Macbeth at last recognizes that the murder is no longer an abstract idea but an accomplished fact. "To know my deed 'twere best not know myself." This one act has transformed him, irrevocably, from Macbeth into an assassin, strange to himself. But Lady Macbeth dismisses such talk as childish: "A little water clears us of this deed." Yet Macbeth soon becomes accustomed to his new identity. He has killed to get the throne, and his reign becomes one long bloodbath in a futile attempt to maintain it.

As in most *film noir*, the distinction between criminal and hero is vague. For a while, Macbeth still has a conscience. He broods on the

deed; he can't sleep; Banquo's ghost appears to him; and he's filled with dread at what he has become. A decent man imprisoned in a murderer's body, he can only stand back and watch as the killer continues to strike. The play's real terror comes not from Macbeth's deeds but from how they transform and corrupt him. Shakespeare was one of the first writers to create both criminal and hero in the same person. He penetrates into what Joseph Conrad would later call the "heart of darkness"—the potential for evil within every civilized human being. If the honorable Macbeth could kill his king, then anything is possible—on heaven, on earth, and within the heart of man.

Macbeth briefly enjoys a sense of security as the stereotypical hardboiled villain—after all, he is now king, the Witches have assured him of his continued success, and his only threat comes from two seemingly unnatural occurrences: from a man not "of woman born" and when Birnam Wood marches to Dunsinane. In his eagerness to feel secure, Macbeth forgets that the Witch-

GUILT OR INDIGESTION?

In an article on the Scottish national dish, haggis, the *Newsweek* writer Mark Starr wrote, "A number of Shakespearean revisionists now believe that Macbeth spied the ghost of Banquo at the banquet not out of guilt, but as a result of having just dined on haggis." Starr helpfully provides the recipe: "Sheep's lungs, heart and liver, mixed with suet, oats and seasonings—all boiled in the animal's stomach."



es are crafty equivocators who play with words, making truth seem like fiction and fiction, truth.

Even as Macduff and the English forces gather around him, Macbeth struggles to maintain his sense of invulnerability. But as events start closing in and he becomes increasingly isolated, his beliefs topple, one by one, as he sees through the illusion of worldly power. Kingship, power, his wife, existence itself are meaningless. Macbeth is one of the first existentialist antiheroes. Inured to horror, he is exhausted, bored, and cruel. After basing his existence on portents and prophecies, he now looks at life and sees that tomorrow is just as meaningless as today:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
 To the last syllable of recorded time;
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
 The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
 And then is heard no more. It is a tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
 Signifying nothing.

(V.5.19-28)

As he wades through evil, Macbeth moves further and further away from all natural human impulses and sensations. The murder that first bound him to his wife has now driven them apart. Once, Lady Macbeth believed that "a little water" could wash her of the deed; now she compulsively washes her hands, unable to rid herself of guilt. Horrified by her capacity for sin, she relives the crime over and over again. Upon learning that Lady Macbeth, the sole prop of his life, has committed suicide, Macbeth says, "She should have died hereafter."

The story of a bad man who commits a crime is not a tragedy but a straightforward tale of evil. *Macbeth*, however, is about a good man who becomes evil, and that *is* his tragedy. At the end, numb to all feeling, he distantly remembers what he once was and what it was like to be human:

Louis Marder cites a German production of the play in which in each act, the walls of the stage increasingly close in on Macbeth.



I have almost forgot the taste of fears.
 The time has been my senses would have cooled
 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 supped full with horrors:
 Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,
 Cannot once start me.

(V.5.9-15)

It is his capacity for self-scrutiny that makes Macbeth a worthy tragic subject. He never lies to himself about the nature of his deed, never rationalizes to justify his actions. Aware that he is doomed, he pursues his damnation headlong to his own destruction.



The Porter Scene

No one has written a more thrilling theatrical moment than the knocking in *Macbeth* (although many people can scarcely remember who came through the door).

—JOHN MORTIMER

PORTER. Knock, knock! Who's there in the other devil's name? Faith, here's an equivocator that could swear in both the scales against either scale, who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven. O, come in, equivocator.

Macbeth's drunken Porter believes he is the gatekeeper to hell and welcomes all "equivocators" to the castle. "Equivocator" had an explosive meaning for the Elizabethans, specifically alluding to the Gunpowder Plot, a conspiracy to blow up the houses of Parliament and kill