

Study Guide: *Macbeth*

Background Information

The Tragedy of Macbeth was written in 1606, when Shakespeare's energies were entirely directed toward great tragedies (right after *Othello* and *King Lear* and right before *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*).



The title page in the First Folio

Shakespeare's play tells the story of a brave but flawed man who kills the King to take over the throne of Scotland. Macbeth had, it seems, already some thoughts of trying to become King, but his ambition is kindled when he meets three witches who prophesy that he will become King. He struggles with these thoughts for a while, but his wife convinces him to go ahead with a plan to kill Duncan and take the throne. After they become King and Queen, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth both suffer from guilty consciences and feel their grip on both the kingdom and even on their sanity grow weaker.

Changing the Scene

Shakespeare's plays are often changed slightly for modern performance. You may have seen movies such as Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes, which is set in 1990's "Verona Beach" in California. The director changed very few of Shakespeare's words, but changed the meaning of some words by putting them in a different context.

Watch the Romeo and Juliet trailer on YouTube: <http://youtu.be/sMe113nY0PE>

Some people like such changes, while some people find them disturbing. Perhaps it will be useful to remember that Shakespeare himself made changes to his sources when he turned the stories into plays. For example, in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare changed the story about the traitor Macdonwald (“Damico” in our production) from his source, Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles of the History of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1577, revised 1587). In the source—which may or may not be an entirely accurate historical account—Macdonwald commits suicide. In order to show Macbeth a brave soldier, Shakespeare has Macbeth kill Macdonwald, as described by the Bleeding Sergeant in the second scene of the play:

For brave Macbeth—well he deserves that name—
 Disdaining fortune, with his brandished steel,
 Which smoked with bloody execution,
 Like valor’s minion carved out his passage
 Till he faced the slave;
 Which ne’er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
 Till he unseamed him from the nave to th’ chops.... (1.2.16-22)



Macbeth and Banquo encounter the three witches.
 (Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, 1577)

By updating the setting of a Shakespeare play, some people find it easier to relate to the characters and situations presented. By the way, even some Shakespeare plays that we think of as having “authentic” or “period” sets and costumes do not. Kenneth Branagh’s epic *Hamlet* (1996) actually features costumes and props from the nineteenth century, approximately 250 years after Shakespeare wrote the play.

Watch Branagh’s “To be or not to be” on YouTube: <http://youtu.be/-JD6gOrARk4>

You will hear familiar names of places in and around New York—Brooklyn, Queens, and Pallisades, as well as the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and The Bowery—during this production. However, we decided not to change the oft-repeated place names Glamis (pronounced “Glahmz”), Cawdor, and Fife. These names may be imagined, in this production, to be lesser-known precincts of New York. Malcolm flees to England in the original play; we have changed this locale to New Orleans, a city with historical connections to the New York mafia.

Things that Happen Before The Play

In this version of the 1930’s New York mafia, Duncan has presided for many years over a relatively quiet and prosperous time for the mafia. He is one of the “good” mafia types—he is not cruel and does not order unnecessary hits on his rivals.

However, as the play opens, Duncan’s mob faces trouble on two fronts. A traitor, Damico, aided by the Boss of Cawdor, is trying to overthrow Duncan from inside the mafia. Meanwhile, a rival Sicilian Don, Sweno, is trying to encroach upon Duncan’s turf in Brooklyn. Two of Duncan’s *capos* (see mob glossary below), Macbeth and Banquo, are leading the fight against these two threats, and Macbeth especially shows his bravery in this fight.

Duncan has two grown-up (but rather young) sons, but has not yet named a successor to himself as Godfather. One might expect that he would name his older son Malcolm the successor, but after Macbeth’s conspicuous bravery, Macbeth also becomes a contender for the title *capodecina*, or heir apparent to the office of Godfather. Duncan’s wife is mentioned briefly in the play as a good woman, but she does not appear on stage. The audience may assume she has passed away.

Lady Macbeth famously tells her husband at one point, “I have given suck, and know / How tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me.” Thus, she has had at least one child. However, Macbeth has no children; he laments the fact that “no son of [his] succeeding,” an “unlineal hand” will take the reins of power upon his death. There are two leading schools of thought as to how both of these statements can be true. In one school of thought, Lady Macbeth was married and had a child or children before marrying Macbeth. Another possibility is that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth had one or more children who died.

Themes in Macbeth

There are many references to sleep in the play. Duncan is killed in his sleep; Lady Macbeth walks in her sleep; Macbeth says he will “sleep no more” after committing regicide. On a related note, A. C. Bradley famously noted that many of the play’s most memorable scenes—for example, the imaginary dagger, Duncan’s murder, the porter scene, Banquo’s murder, and the banquet his ghost visits—“take place at night or in some dark spot.” The play, like many of the tragedies, makes much of light and darkness as images.

Equivocation is also a major theme in the play. The witches are some of the most

skilled equivocators ever: their words are literally true, but lead Macbeth to destruction. He questions their words, but only after it is too late: “I pull in resolution and begin / To doubt th' equivocation of the fiend / That lies like truth.”

Blood, in its literal sense as a bodily fluid, is very present in the play. It is famously present in the scene in which the Macbeths display their bloody hands after the murder of Duncan, and present in the language of Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene. However, Macbeth also notes that the first murderer has blood on his face when he brings Macbeth the news of Banquo's death. Then, the ghost has “gory locks.” Blood as a bodily fluid was associated with courage, desire, and optimism in the medical theories of the day. Other bodily fluids, such as milk (kindness, peace) and gall (bitterness, hatred) serve to contrast with the overwhelming presence of blood in the play.

Another meaning of blood—as in bloodlines—is also a major theme in the play. The play tells the story of Macbeth's failure to wipe out Duncan's bloodline, of his failure to produce an heir of his own line, and of the preservation of Banquo's bloodline—through whom King James traced his own ancestry.



(Images from the Folger Shakespeare Library and Google Images)

A Note on the Macbeths



Caroline Reich and Gary Sloan, 1994.
(Folger image)

This play, perhaps surprisingly, is one of Shakespeare's most extended demonstrations of a marriage relationship. The fact that the Macbeths are married at the beginning of the play (and remain so until death) and appear very often on stage together is almost unique in Shakespeare. It seems the Macbeths have a loving relationship. Macbeth calls his wife "my dearest love" and "dearest chuck." They work together to achieve their goals. On the other hand, it certainly seems that Lady Macbeth is a bit controlling, and Macbeth a bit distant.

Many have noted that the Macbeths seem tied to each other in a very precise manner: without exception, when one is weak, the other is strong. When Macbeth wants to back out of the plan, Lady Macbeth strongly berates him. However, she is unable to murder Duncan in his sleep—he looks too much like her father—so Macbeth does it. Later, Lady Macbeth is able to carry back the daggers to the bedroom when Macbeth cannot. At the banquet, Lady Macbeth is strong enough to handle the situation when her husband sees the ghost. However, as Macbeth settles into his role as a violent, ruthless tyrant at the end of the play, Lady Macbeth breaks down completely.

Mafia Language Used in This Production

To make the 1930's setting in Mafia-controlled Brooklyn more believable, this production has substituted Mafia slang—such as you may have heard in movies like *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas*—for certain Scottish and Elizabethan English words in the original play. Thus, for "thane," "kerns," and "my lord," you may hear "boss," "capo" or "sir." In addition, we have changed references from "King" to "Godfather," "Padrino," or "Don." Here is a list of some of the technical terms and slang—much of it derived from Italian—that you will hear in the show.

borgata -- "the family," i.e., the Mafia

capo -- "leader" or "boss," a minor leader in the Mafia

capodecina -- a bigger leader; in this production, the next Godfather

capo di tutti capi -- "boss of all bosses"; the Godfather

cosa nostra -- "our thing," i.e., the Mafia

Don -- a title of respect; used for the Godfather
 Godfather -- the absolute ruler of the Mafia in a given city
goombah -- a term of affection, "buddy"
Padrino -- Italian for Godfather
tesoro -- darling, sweetheart
 wiseguy -- an fairly high-ranking member of the Mafia

References and Further Reading

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