**Semester 2, CC4**

Macbeth, William Shakespeare

Macbeth: Introduction

Probably composed in late 1606 or early 1607, Macbeth is the last of Shakespeare's four great tragedies, the others being Hamlet, King Lear and Othello. It is a relatively short play without a major subplot, and it is considered by many scholars to be Shakespeare's darkest work. Lear is an utter tragedy in which the natural world is amorally indifferent toward mankind, but in Macbeth, Shakespeare adds a supernatural dimension that purposively conspires against Macbeth and his kingdom. In the tragedy of Lear, the distraught king summons the goddess of Chaos, Hecht; in Macbeth, Hecate appears as an actual character. On the level of human evil, Shakespeare's Scottish tragedy is about Macbeth's bloody rise to power, including the murder of the Scottish king, Duncan, and the guilt-ridden pathology of evil deeds generating still more evil deeds. As an integral part of this thematic web is the play's most memorable character, Lady Macbeth. Like her husband, Lady Macbeth's ambition for power leads her into an unnatural, phantasmagoric realm of witchcraft, insomnia and madness. But while Macbeth responds to the prophecies of the play's famous trio of witches, Lady Macbeth goes even further by figuratively transforming herself into an unnatural, desexualized evil spirit. The current trend of critical opinion is toward an upward reevaluation of Lady Macbeth, who is said to be rehumanized by her insanity and her suicide. Much of this reappraisal of Lady Macbeth has taken place in discussions of her ironically strong marriage to Macbeth, a union that rests on loving bonds but undergoes disintegration as the tragedy unfolds.

Macbeth: William Shakespeare Biography

William Shakespeare (1564–1616) is generally considered to be the greatest playwright and poet that has ever lived. His appeal is universal and his works have been translated, read, and analyzed throughout the world. Shakespeare wrote 154 sonnets, many poems, and 37 plays which have been grouped into comedies, histories, and tragedies. Shakespeare’s plays combine natural human conflict with dramatic flair producing entertainment that appeals to the audiences of today as well as the audiences for which they were written. Shakespeare understood human nature, and he created characters that portrayed human tragedy and human comedy. Some of his characters were fantastic and unworldly, yet they brought to the stage the truth that mere mortals could not. Shakespeare was born in Stratford-Upon-Avon, in England. The exact date of his birth is unknown; however, records indicate he was baptized on April 26, 1564, at Holy Trinity Church. Traditionally, a baby was baptized about three days after birth, which would make Shakespeare’s birthday April 23, 1564. His father, John Shakespeare, was from the yeoman class and his mother, Mary Arden, was from a higher class known as the gentry class. The marriage raised John’s status in town and the Shakespeare family enjoyed prominence and success in Stratford. This is verified through John Shakespeare’s landholding and his status as an alderman. William was the third child of eight, and it can be assumed he attended the local grammar school in Stratford. School ran for nine hours a day, year-round, and strict discipline was enforced. Shakespeare probably attended school until he was 15, which was customary for the time. Around this time, Shakespeare’s father was experiencing financial difficulty, and William probably took a job to help the family. His father was a glover and dealer in commodities, and Shakespeare may have assisted his father in his business, but it is presumed Shakespeare worked in a variety of jobs. At 18, Shakespeare had an affair with Anne Hathaway, who was eight years his senior. They married, and six months later they had a child. Susanna Shakespeare was born in May of 1583 and in 1585 twins, Hamnet and Judith, were born to the Shakespeares. Little is known of that period except that the twins were christened in February 1585. Shakespeare’s life became public record in 1592 through a pamphlet written by Robert Greene with criticism of Shakespeare’s work as an actor as well as a playwright. After Greene’s death, the letter appeared again. Almost as quickly as it appeared, Greene’s publisher printed an apology to Shakespeare. From 1592 to 1594 many public theaters were closed due to the plague, and Shakespeare wrote poems and sonnets during this period. In 1594, he became a shareholder in a company of actors known as the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. From 1594 to 1608 he was completely involved in the theatre. His time in the years 1608 to 1616 was divided between the theater and his family. Shakespeare’s success as a playwright and shareholder afforded him the luxury of owning homes in London and Stratford. His son Hamnet died at the age of 11. Judith had three boys, but all died. His daughter Susanna had one child, Elizabeth, who had no children. The recorded date for Shakespeare’s death is April 23, 1616. He is buried inside the Stratford parish church. Shakespeare’s last direct descendant, his granddaughter, Elizabeth, died in 1670.

Macbeth: Summary

The play begins on an open stretch of land in medieval Scotland. Three Witches enter and give the prophecy that the civil war will end that day and that at sunset they will meet Macbeth. The Witches are summoned to leave, but they do not leave without stating that what is normally “fair” will be “foul,” and what is “foul” will be “fair.” King Duncan learns that Macbeth has been victorious and has defeated Macdonwald. The Thane of Cawdor has betrayed Duncan and is accused of being a traitor. Duncan orders the Thane of Cawdor’s execution and announces that Macbeth will receive the title of Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth and Banquo leave the battlefield and meet the Witches. The Witches state the prophecy that Macbeth will be Thane of Cawdor and king and that Banquo will be the father of kings, but not king himself. Macbeth has been victorious on the battlefield and the war is at an end—to what greatness should he now aspire? The Witches spark the ambitious nature in Macbeth, as he knows his rise to power would greatly be enhanced by being named Thane of Cawdor. After the Witches vanish, Ross and Angus arrive and announce that Macbeth has been named Thane of Cawdor. Banquo is skeptical of the Witches, but Macbeth, driven by a desire for power, considers killing Duncan to gain the crown. Macbeth is overwhelmed by the image, yet his desire for power is still present, as stated in a letter he sends to Lady Macbeth. Lady Macbeth encourages Macbeth to act on his thoughts, telling him that she will guide and support his plan to kill King Duncan. While Duncan is visiting Inverness, Macbeth’s castle, Macbeth kills Duncan as he sleeps. After the murder is discovered, Macbeth kills the servants, whom he accuses of Duncan’s murder. Duncan’s sons, fearing for their own lives, flee Scotland. Macbeth is crowned king. Banquo raises suspicions that Macbeth killed Duncan. Macbeth hires two men to kill Banquo and his son Fleance, whom Macbeth fears will become king, as the Witches foretold. Banquo is killed, but Fleance escapes. The Witches conjure a spell, and Apparitions reveal to Macbeth three prophecies that will affect his future. He is told to beware of Macduff, that no man born of woman can harm him, and he will not be conquered until the forest at Birnam marches to Dunsinane. Macbeth is also shown a procession of kings with the last king looking in a mirror—the reflection is that of Banquo. Macbeth orders Macduff’s family to be murdered and leaves for England to confront Macduff. When Macduff hears of the massacre of his family, he vows to seek revenge on Macbeth. He joins Malcolm in his quest to depose Macbeth. The army proceeds in camouflage by carrying a branch from Birnam Wood into battle. Alarmed by this, Macbeth fears the Witches’ prophecy will come true. Macbeth is told of Lady Macbeth’s death by her own hands, and he laments the nature of his life. Macbeth fights Macduff, and Macbeth boasts that he cannot be killed by any man born of woman. Macduff informs Macbeth that he was surgically removed from his mother’s womb and thus was not born of woman. Macduff kills Macbeth in battle and hails Malcolm as King of Scotland. Malcolm vows to restore Scotland to a peaceful country