

The play *Macbeth* ends with a murdered King Macbeth, his queen dead of madness and guilt, and a stage full of slaughtered Scottish soldiers. Why would anyone want to introduce this play to children?

This is a reasonable question, but the only real answer is that they love it. The murder and mayhem caused by power-hungry and ambitious people may hit close to home for adults; but for children the bloody, dark events are pure make-believe. A battlefield, a remote castle, mysterious witches on a dark, windy night, a midnight murder, a queen going mad—all these provide excitement and hold children's attention, whether they are watching or performing.

Macbeth starts with the aftermath of a battle in which the title character is celebrated and praised for his great valor in fighting off Celtic invaders. But Macbeth's unraveling begins immediately afterwards. He and Banquo, a fellow lord and friend, meet three witches, whose strange appearance and even stranger predictions frighten him.

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Macbeth is uneasily attracted to the witches' prophecy that he will be king, though he cannot conceive of how that will come about. All too soon, he finds himself a murderer and his wife the ready accomplice to Duncan's murder. In a hurling downward spiral, Macbeth quickly changes from a triumphant hero to a tortured despot—a man who inflicts cruelty on others and who cannot save himself.

The 1100s in Scotland and England were a dark, suspicious time. People with all levels of education believed devoutly in witches and ghosts and were convinced that the supernatural was a powerful force. Children seem to grasp this notion right away, and they know there is a difference between that time and their own. They also understand that while many men and women act heroically and bravely, they can also reach too far.

The events of *Macbeth* are based on medieval Scottish history, although Shakespeare's work does not stick firmly to the facts. The historical Macbeth may have had reasons to want to kill King Duncan, for the real King Duncan was a usurper to the throne. In Shakespeare's play, though, Duncan is portrayed as a decent, blameless ruler.

Shakespeare's chief printed source for British and Roman history was a book called *Chronicles* by Raphael Holinshed, but Shakespeare was just as influenced by common lore and by other people's plays and stories. He wrote the play late in his career, probably around 1606 when James I, a Scottish king, had succeeded the long-reigning Queen Elizabeth on the English throne.

We blame Macbeth's downfall on his ambition, his fear, his confusion at the witches' prophecies, and his desire to satisfy his wife's entreaties that he act like a man. Whether Macbeth has a hand in his own fate or is merely its pawn is a question mature audiences may argue over. Children watching the play, however, generally do not concern themselves with why the events happen, simply that they do.

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ACT I

Scene 1

Outdoors, semidark, foggy, and eerie.

(MUSIC.)

(ENTER NARRATOR AND WITCHES. There can be three or more witches, as needed for casting. Make adjustments to script and stage direction as necessary.)

FIRST WITCH:

When shall we three meet again?
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

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SECOND WITCH:

When the hurly-burly's done,
When the battle's lost and won.

THIRD WITCH:

That will be before the set of sun.

FIRST WITCH:

Where the place?

SECOND WITCH:

Upon the heath.

THIRD WITCH:

There to meet with Macbeth.

ALL WITCHES TOGETHER:

Fair is foul and foul is fair.
Hover through the fog and filthy air.

(EXIT WITCHES.)

(MUSIC.)

ACT I

Scene 2

Duncan's castle.

*(ENTER DUNCAN, CAPTAIN, MALCOLM, DONALBAIN, and LENNOX.
The Captain is bleeding, weak.)*

NARRATOR:

Welcome, my friends, to medieval Scotland, to the Court of King Duncan. War has been raging across the heath as the Scottish thanes fight to turn back invaders from Ireland and Norway. Here in Duncan's court, word has just arrived that the battle is won. Messengers say that the mighty Macbeth fought valiantly to defend the Scottish king. No foe can stand against him.

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KING DUNCAN:

What bloody man is that?
(Points at Captain.)

MALCOLM:

This is the sergeant
Who like a good and hardy soldier fought
Against my captivity. Hail, brave friend!

CAPTAIN:

All's too weak for brave Macbeth—well, he deserves that name.
He faced the villain my captor
never shook hands nor bade farewell to him
Till he unseamed him from the nave to the chaps
And fixed his head upon our battlements.

KING DUNCAN:

O valiant cousin, worthy gentleman!
So well thy words become thee as thy wounds,
They smack of honor both. Go get him surgeons.

(EXIT ALL.)