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The Queens of Shakespeare in Hamlet and Macbeth

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1. Introduction

William Shakespeare, born in 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon, was an English poet, playwright, and actor who continues to be one of, if not the most, important literary figure of the English language. There are not many records of him or his family, but historians have concluded that, although John Shakespeare and Mary Arden, his parents, were not wealthy, they had enough of elevated status to have sent their children, including their eldest son, William, to the local grammar school. At the age of eighteen, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway and they had three children: Susanna, and twins Hamnet and Judith.

Although his family remained in his hometown, Shakespeare spent most of his time in London, where he established his successful career. Starting out, he was one of the founding members of The Lord Chamberlain's Men, a company of actors, and he was the company's regular dramatist. His first works, two long poems called *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, were published in 1593 and 1594 respectively. Under the rule of King James I, from 1603 until his death in 1625, Shakespeare's theater company evolved into The King's Men and it was during this time when we wrote many of his most famous plays, tragedies, such as *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, and romances, like *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*.

In his short career of approximately 20 to 25 years, Shakespeare managed to produce 38 plays, 2 narrative poems and a variety of other poems, and 154 sonnets. Arguably, Shakespeare's plays, specifically the tragedies, are what have made him one of the greatest dramatists of all time. This literary legacy of tragedies have been the inspiration for a myriad of adaptations across various genres and cultures, as well as become a key reference for theater and playwriting.

Shakespeare's most famous tragedies include *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *Julius Caesar*, *King Lear*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. All of these plays have elements in common that are combined to result in the most tragic outcome possible. Usually, Shakespeare's plays focus on a wealthy and powerful nobleman, in these cases, a tragic hero, who is submitted to internal and external, sometimes supernatural, circumstances that bring out and strengthen the hero's flaw, which ultimately leads to greed, revenge, a battle between good and evil, and, finally, the hero's downfall.

However, "Behind every great man there is a great woman" and the women behind the great heroes in Shakespeare's plays have crucial roles to play when it comes to the unfolding of the play. This monograph will focus on the discussion and analysis of the roles

of Lady Macbeth and Queen Gertrude, in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* respectively, as well as a comparison between these two very complex female characters.

2. Macbeth: Summary

Although Shakespeare's plays seem original, it is highly probable that he used the second revised edition of *The firste volume of the chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande*, more commonly known as *Holinshed's Chronicles*, published in 1587, as a source for most of his historical plays like, *Richard III*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*.

The tragedy of *Macbeth*, which takes place in medieval Scotland, retells Holinshed's story of Duncan and his reign. While most of the plot is inspired by Holinshed's story, Shakespeare gives Lady Macbeth a larger role, inventing her sleepwalking habits and suicidal thoughts and introduces other supernatural themes like the haunting of Macbeth by Banquo's ghost. The play is divided into five acts taking place in four major settings: Forres (The King's Palace), Inverness (Macbeth's castle), Fife (Macduff's castle) and different places in nature.

The play begins with the Three Witches meeting in a desert place in thunder, lightning and rain. By their conversation, they will meet the main character of the play, Macbeth, after a battle has been lost and won, and with one final chant "Fair is foul and foul is fair", they announce that good is bad and bad is good, which means that everything is not as it seems, or, more likely, that moral values may be reversed at some point.

When the witches meet again, with Macbeth and Banquo, they prophesy that Macbeth will be thane (a Scottish noble title) of Cawdor and, eventually, the King of Scotland. They also prophecy that Banquo will not be king himself, but will beget a line of kings. Both men are confused by these prophecies, but when other soldiers find them and tell them Macbeth will be made thane of Cawdor by the King, Duncan, he becomes intrigued by the possibility of being king next. They all go to meet King Duncan at the palace, where he names his eldest son, Malcolm, The Prince of Cumberland, making him next in line for the throne, and invites himself and his court to Macbeth's castle, Inverness. Macbeth becomes even more intrigued because he wonders how he could become king if Malcolm was next in line and writes ahead to his wife, Lady Macbeth.

The main female character in the play, Lady Macbeth is introduced next. She enters reading the letter sent ahead from her husband, Macbeth. In the letter, he tells her about the witches' prophecy, his desire for it to come true and asks her to keep it a secret. Lady Macbeth finished reading the letter and automatically knows what has to be done - murder Duncan - but she also knows that her husband's nature "is too full o' the milk of human kindness to catch the nearest way". She is anxious for him to come home so that she may

persuade him to take the necessary action, making him realize what he would have to gain, since, having it been fate or metaphysical help, the crown was his to take. When Macbeth arrives at his castle, Lady Macbeth immediately proposes Duncan's murder for him to become king. He is tempted, but he knows that there will be dire consequences if he goes through with killing Duncan to become king himself. However, Lady Macbeth convinces him by attacking his manhood and claiming that he had promised her that we would do it. He caves in and Lady Macbeth comes up with a more detailed plan: they will wait until everyone's asleep, get Duncan's guards drunk so that Macbeth could enter his chamber and kill him and then blame the death on the guards.

Before doing the deed, Macbeth runs into Banquo and his son, Fleance, who are wandering the castle. Both men agree to talk about the witches' prophecies after and Banquo swears that he will remain by his friend's side as long as he is honorable and loyal. When Macbeth is alone, he sees a dagger before him, leading him to Duncan's room, and, hallucination or not, he is going to the king's room to murder him. He hears a bell, a prearranged signal from Lady Macbeth to indicate that the guards are down and it's time to kill to put the plan in action.

The next morning, Duncan's bloody corpse is found and Macbeth kills the guards in a "fit of rage" because they were clearly guilty of the murder. Hearing of their father's murder, Malcolm and Donalbain are suspicious of the circumstance of his death, but decide to flee to England and Ireland, respectively, fearing that their lives too are in danger. This frees up the way for Macbeth to easily become the King of Scotland, the last part of the Witches' prophecy for Macbeth coming true.

Macbeth takes up residence as king in Forres. Banquo is suspicious of Macbeth having murdered Duncan to fulfill his prophecy, but also wonders whether his prophecy could also become true. The two men meet up and Banquo tells Macbeth that he will go for a ride with Fleance in the woods, but that he will be back to the palace in time for the feast in commemoration of Macbeth's coronation as king. Even though Banquo and him are good friends, Macbeth feels threatened by the fact that Banquo suspects him of having had murdered Duncan and the Witches's prophecy about Banquo begetting a line of kings, so he meets up with two men, hired murderers, convinces them that Banquo is as much their enemy as he is the king's and "orders" them to go to the forrest to kill Banquo and his son Fleance to tie up loose ends. The men agree and Macbeth tells them exactly where and when to strike. In a park near the palace, a third man joins the other murderers and they wait for the best opportunity. When they attack, Banquo tells his son Fleance to run and escape death so that

he may, one day, get revenge. The three men go back to the palace and tell Macbeth that they managed to kill Banquo, but that the kid escaped. Macbeth is troubled by this but tries to put on a good face for his guests at the feast. As he mentions Banquo's absence, the ghost of Banquo appears and Macbeth is horrified, Lady Macbeth tries to make him settle down because the guests will become suspicious. However, as he mentions Banquo's name again, the ghost appears once more and sends Macbeth into a crazy spiral. Lady Macbeth tells everyone to leave and tries once more to make her husband calm down, but instead, he becomes angry that Macduff was not present and vows to visit the witches again in the morning.

Lennox and another lord talk about the crazy events that have taken place, probably a reflection of Macbeth's tyrant rule. They mention that Malcolm is safe in King Edward's castle and that Macduff has gone there to ask for England's as well as Norway's help to rid themselves of their tyrant kin. Macbeth knows of this and is already preparing for war.

As he had vowed, Macbeth goes to see the witches, who are dancing around a cauldron and performing a charm, along with Hecate, the mother witch, and other witches. He demands to know more of his fate and three apparitions come to give him a new prophecy: beware Macduff; Macbeth cannot be killed by anyone born of a woman; and Macbeth shall not be defeated until the trees of Birnam Wood move toward his castle on Dunsinane Hill. This new prophecy makes Macbeth feel very powerful, over-confident and undefeatable. However, he is unsatisfied and asks the witches whether Banquo's prophecy will come true and it is confirmed by another apparition of a line of kings who all resemble Banquo. The witches tell the King that Macduff has gone to England and he is so enraged that he swears to go to Macduff's home on Fife and kill all of his family and staff.

Macbeth goes through with killing all of Macduff's family and staff and when Macduff hears this news in England, he vows to strike down Macbeth as revenge.

It is in act 5 that Lady Macbeth appears again. A doctor and a gentlewoman are discussing Lady Macbeth's nightly routine and strange behavior. The gentlewoman says she sleepwalks, talks to herself, writes letters and goes to bed. They both witness Lady Macbeth sleepwalking. All the while she rubs her hands, as if washing them of blood, says she can smell the blood and complains that "all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand". She clearly references the night of Duncan's murder and though she did not do the act herself, she feels as the blood is also in her hands. She also mentions Lady Macduff's horrible murder and Banquo's murder as well, both of them by her husband's hands. The doctor finds this very unusual and he and the gentlewoman have their suspicions of the king and queen's

involvement in Duncan's, Banquo's and the Macduff castle's murders. The doctor says that she is to be watched carefully at all times so as to not hurt herself in these sleepwalking episodes.

The Scottish nobles and soldiers go to join the English army to fight the tyrant Macbeth. They discuss Macbeth's state of mind and tyranny. They also acknowledge that everyone has left Macbeth and only a few remain, out of duty, not love for the king.

Macbeth is warned that the English armies and "Scottish traitors" are approaching Dunsinane. He is confident and does not fear this because of the witches' prophecies. The doctor reports that he can no further do anything to help his Lady Macbeth. The King makes a parallel between his wife's and Scotland's condition, asking the doctor for a drug that will save them both. He reassures himself of the prophecy and prepares for battle.

While the English army and Scottish nobles and rebels make their way to Dunsinane castle, Macbeth is confidently preparing himself for battle when he is informed that Lady Macbeth is dead. He begins to question the meaning of life and reassures himself that the queen would have died sooner or later. Macbeth is told that Birnam Wood is moving toward Dunsinane; by Malcolm's orders, the soldiers cut down the branches of the trees and carry them to hide their true numbers from Macbeth's scouts. He suddenly loses confidence as the first part of the prophecy has come true, but prepares his small army for a fight until victory or death.

As the troops launch an attack on the castle, Macbeth feels trapped, but hangs on to the second part of the prophecy, that no man born of woman can kill him. The battle eventually comes down to Macduff and Macbeth, who does not want to kill him because his family's blood is already on his hands. Confidently, Macbeth announces the witches second prophecy and is surprised by Macduff's reply that he was "from his mother's womb untimely ripped" and therefore was not born of a woman. Ultimately, the last fight results in Macduff killing Macbeth, bringing his army the tyrant king's head.

Malcolm is appointed the new King of Scotland, as was his right when his father was murdered, and promises to greatly reward the lords and soldiers and vows to find justice for all who were affected by Macbeth's tyranny. He announces a new era of peace for Scotland and invites all to his coronation.

3. Lady Macbeth: Character Analysis

4. Hamlet: Summary

5. Queen Gertrude: Character Analysis

6. Lady Macbeth and Queen Gertrude: Comparison

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1. Short introduction (William Shakespeare - author of plays - tragedies - plays that will be analyzed and discussed) **OK**
2. Short summary (Macbeth)
3. Introduce and Analyze (Lady Macbeth)
4. Short summary (Hamlet)
5. Introduce and Analyze (Queen Gertrude)
6. Compare the female characters (Answer questions: How are they related to the King? (By which means did they become queens?); Who controls who and to which extent? (King and Lady Macbeth / King Claudius and Queen Gertrude); How do they die? (Suicide and Poised wine); Why do they die?(Madness and Deceit))
7. Closing argument