***Introduction to the Main Characters in Macbeth***

**Macbeth**

The horrific and detestable acts perpetrated by Macbeth mirror the crimes of Shakespeare's great villains -- Aaron the Moor, Iago, Richard III, Edmund -- all at the ready to slaughter women and children, usurp divinely appointed kings, and butcher their closest friends to satisfy ambitious cravings. Yet, despite his villainous deeds, Macbeth is not among the list of Shakespeare's most base evildoers. What sets Macbeth apart is his penchant for self-reflection. Although ultimately he cannot resist his dark desires, his struggle to regain his goodness is constant, and the part of his character that is capable of much love and compassion, although ever fading, is always present. There is no moral dilemma with Shakespeare's true villains. They relish every moment of their immorality. Thus, rather than a villain, Macbeth is considered to be one of Shakespeare's tragic heroes. He is by no means the epitome of the Aristotelian tragic hero, as is Hamlet, but he is a tragic hero nonetheless, because we, the audience, can see ourselves in him.

**Lady Macbeth**

Lady Macbeth is Shakespeare's most evil feminine creation. Her satanic prayer to the forces of darkness in Act 1 is chilling to modern readers and it would have been absolutely terrifying to Jacobean groundlings watching the horror unfold in Shakespeare's own Globe Theatre. Most critical analysis of Lady Macbeth focuses on her as catalyst for Macbeth's first murder, that of Duncan, and the linear progression of her deteriorating mental state, culminating in her sleepwalking scene.

However, the most interesting facet of Lady Macbeth's character is hardly ever explored: that she herself intends to commit the murder of Duncan, while her husband merely plays the smiling host. This precious detail gives Lady Macbeth's invocation new weight and her character new depth. John Dover Wilson, the editor of the first edition of *The Cambridge Macbeth*, was one of the first scholars to bring this hypothesis to light. As he writes in his introduction to the play:

The whole point of Lady Macbeth's invocation is that she intends to murder Duncan herself. She speaks of 'my knife' and of 'my fell purpose.' And the same resolve is implied in everything she says to Macbeth after his entry. She bids him put "This night's great business into my dispatch"...she tells him he need do nothing but look the innocent and kindly host; she dismisses him with the words 'Leave all the rest to me'. All this seems obvious directly it is pointed out, though once again no one appears to have noticed it before, simply because in the end the murder is of course performed by Macbeth himself; and must be, however the drama is shaped. I suggest, by means of a further dialogue between husband and wife, preceded perhaps by a scene in which, going to the bedroom knife in hand, she cannot bring herself to the action; and I further suggest that when he reached this point in 1606 Shakespeare found he had no room for such developments and had to extricate himself as best he could. And how triumphantly he does it! First he writes a soliloquy ('If it were done, when 'tis done') for the beginning of scene 1.7, which conveys the impression that Macbeth was intending all along to do the deed himself; he then later in the same scene makes the guilty pair talk as if they were proposing to do it together ; and finally, though he sends Macbeth to the bedroom alone, he brings Lady Macbeth on to inform us that she has already been there, and that

***Had he not resembled My father as he slept, I had done't.***

(Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. John Dover Wilson ed. Cambridge: UP, 1968. p.p. xxxvii)

**Duncan**

Duncan, the King of Scotland, is Macbeth's first victim en route to obtaining the crown for himself. As is evident here and in all of the history plays, Shakespeare was, at least in the public arena, a firm believer in the divine right of kings.

Usurping a divinely appointed ruler was always the most serious of crimes, but to usurp a valiant and benevolent monarch was wicked beyond comprehension. Thus, for reasons both dramatic and political, Shakespeare had to make notable changes to the historical Duncan. The real King Duncan, according to Shakespeare's sources, was your regular nasty warlord; nastier, it appears, than the actual historical Macbeth. If Shakespeare's Macbeth planned to kill this Duncan he would be justified, and hence there would be no play. So Duncan morphs into a delightful and much beloved ruler, kind to the point of annoyance. With his 'silver skin' and 'golden blood' (2.3.97), Shakespeare's Duncan epitomizes the perfect ruler. Shakespeare’s changes to Duncan’s character are also in keeping with other changes he made to his sources, all seemingly intended to cater to his king and patron, James I.

**Banquo**

Shakespeare's Banquo is the antithesis of Macbeth -- his pure, moral character foil. Banquo has no 'vaulting ambition' and thus can easily escape the trap of the witches' prophesies. Wise and steadfast, Banquo warns Macbeth that

Oftentimes, to win us to our harm,

The instruments of darkness tell us truths, Win us with honest trifles, to betray’s

In deepest consequence. (1.3.132)

Banquo ultimately falls victim to Macbeth, but his son, Fleance, escapes.

**Macduff**

Macduff, the thane of Fife, arrives at Macbeth's castle the morning after Duncan has been murdered. Macduff pronounces the king dead, and is suspicious of Macbeth almost immediately. Macduff quickly sides with Malcolm, Duncan's son and rightful heir to the throne. As punishment for his betrayal, Macbeth hatches a plan to kill Macduff and his whole family. Macbeth's assassins do murder Lady Macduff and his son, but Macduff, who is in England at the time, lives to take his revenge on Macbeth at the end of the play, when he slays in him battle and carries his head to the new king, Malcolm.

**The Three Witches**

Shakespeare's Three Witches, or the Three Weird Sisters, are characters in *Macbeth*, answering to the fates of mythology. They appear first in Act 1, Scene 1, and they make their prophecy known to Macbeth and Banquo in 1.3. In 4.1. they show Macbeth the three apparitions.

The following analysis of Shakespeare's Weird Sisters is an excerpt from the book, *Shakespeare and his Times*, by Nathan Drake:

In the very first appearance, indeed, of the Weird Sisters to Macbeth and Banquo on the blasted heath, we discern beings of a more awful and spiritualized character than belonged to the vulgar herd of witches. "What are these," exclaims the astonished Banquo, --

What are these,

So wither'd, and so wild in their attire?(1.3).

Even when unattended by any human witnesses, when supporting the dialogue merely among themselves, Shakespeare has placed in the mouths of these agents imagery and diction of a cast so peculiar and mysterious as to render them objects of alarm and fear, emotions incompatible with any tendency towards the ludicrous. But when, wheeling round the magic cauldron, in the gloomy recesses of their cave, they commence their incantations, chanting in tones wild and unearthly, and heard only during the intervals of a thunder-storm, their metrical charm, while flashes of subterranean fire obscurely light their haggard features, their language seems to breathe of hell, and we shrink back, as from beings at war with all that is good. Yet is the impression capable of augmentation, and is felt to have attained its acme of sublimity and horror, when, in reply to the question of Macbeth,

How now, you secret, black, and midnight hags? What is't you do?

They reply,-- A deed without a name.

Much, however, of the dread, solemnity, and awe which is experienced in reading this play, from the intervention of the witches, is lost in its representation on the stage, owing to the injudicious custom of bringing them too forward on the scene; where, appearing little better than a group of old women, the effect intended by the poet is not only destroyed, but reversed. Their dignity and grandeur must arise, as evil beings gifted with superhuman powers, from the undefined nature both of their agency and of their eternal forms. Were they indistinctly seen, though audible, at a distance, and, as it were, through a hazy twilight, celebrating their orgies, and with shadowy and gigantic shape flitting between the pale blue flames of their caldron and the eager eye of the spectator, sufficient latitude would be given to the imagination, and the finest drama of our author would receive in the theatre that deep tone of supernatural horror with which it is felt to be so highly imbued in the solitude of the closet. (589)