***Macbeth***

Death in Tragedies

The reason that death is tolerable in tragedies is that it’s meaningful. If villainous characters die, they are justly punished for their villainy, which ends with their death. If good characters die, someone else’s villainy is to blame. Good Christian characters do not generally commit suicide; pre-Christian characters who do so are following societal norms. But being killed by oneself or by another are the only two ways to die in most tragedies; there are normally no deaths due to accident, random chance, or bad luck.

It is not a coincidence that the exceptions to much of what I just said come in *Romeo and Juliet* and in *Othello.* They are the only two tragedies derived from fiction rather than history; the young lovers’ deaths are their parents’ punishment for feuding, and Othello’s suicide is self-execution for murder.

Some Contexts for *Macbeth*

The first and most relevant context for this play is that King James was the patron of the theatre company to which Shakespeare belonged. James believed in witchcraft (hence the witches) and was descended from Banquo (hence the vision of a great man in that bloodline, many generations in the future). James was also King of Scotland before he became (additionally, not instead) King of England; it was a general compliment to him for Shakespeare to dramatize Scottish history for a change.

The second context for this play would be Scottish history. Macbeth was king circa 1040-1057; as usual Shakespeare has accelerated time to make punishment follow closely on crime. Malcolm III (son of Duncan I, who was king before Macbeth) reigned from 1057 to 1093. Even before James, the English chronicles (one of which Shakespeare used as his primary source) considered Macbeth a bad guy and Malcolm a good guy, but these are not impartial or historically accurate judgments. They are driven in part by royal genealogy: Malcolm married Margaret, now known as St. Margaret of Scotland, and their daughter Matilda married King Henry I of England; every subsequent monarch of England descends from Malcolm and Margaret. The English judgments are driven also by the fact that Malcolm, influenced by Margaret, anglicized Scotland in general somewhat, the Scottish church a great deal, and his court most of all. Scottish historians consider Macbeth to have been the better – more authentically Scottish – king.

The third context for this play is theatrical superstition. Theatre people do not name the play; they call it “the Scottish play.” It is considered cursed, and any mishap during a production is blamed on the curse.

Responsibility and Sympathy

There are numerous ways to divide up the responsibility for events in this play. Is Macbeth or Lady Macbeth more responsible for Duncan’s death? If the witches are simply telling people what will happen, can those people resist what is fated to be? (Or are the witches tempting people to sin by telling them what might happen if they do?) At what point is Macbeth no longer sane, so that his murders are due to madness rather than sinfulness? It is useful to remember that every murder is a step down from the previous one in terms of political necessity: Duncan, then his attendants, then Banquo, and finally Macduff’s wife and children.

Productions – especially their directors and the actors playing Macbeth and Lady Macbeth – need to decide whether the audience ought to be sympathetic to the murderous pair. Shakespeare shows us that crime **is** punishment, and the mad scene of Lady Macbeth sleepwalking invites our pity; on the other hand, Macbeth is clearly responsible for the murders after Duncan’s, and his continued bloodshed hardens him to commit more. But he demands pity as well as horror in some of his soliloquies.