

## STRUCTURE

*Macbeth* is the shortest of Shakespeare's tragedies and the most rapid in its movement. It has no subplot, and the main events of its single unified action are highlighted to leave less important matters undefined in the shadows .

The formal structure of the action also reinforces its moral theme, suggesting the exact balance of the retribution against the crime by 'even handed justice' (Lvii.1 0). It is organized symmetrically about the Banquet Scene. The first half of the play shows Macbeth's rise to power, the second his fall, the two movements being interrelated by the murder of Banquo. This murder that was intended to ensure Macbeth's safety actually leads to his exposure and his overthrow. Shakespeare's tragedies often begin with a scene that presents, not the major characters, but the underlying forces that will determine the action . In *Macbeth* the parallelism of the two halves is emphasised by prefacing both with the Witches, who prompt the action that is to follow and give outward expression to the evil already working in Macbeth's mind; and their two prophetic scenes are also parallel to each other, in each three statements about Macbeth are followed by the prediction of Banquo's royal line.



The formality of the structure is increased by the complementary development of the characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth: while he becomes more hardened in evil she weakens, until in the end she finds his earlier fears being realised in her dreams while he is priding himself on the callousness that she exulted in at the beginning.

This deliberate structuring of the play to draw attention to its moral theme is reminiscent of the morality plays that were still being performed at the end of the sixteenth century. They dramatised the conflict between good and evil in the soul of man. The central character represented humanity in general - he is given names such as 'Everyman' or 'Mankind' - and the other characters were personifications of virtues and vices, or angels and devils, which acted out a moral allegory. The role of the Witches in *Macbeth* resembles that of the morality devils, and there are several references to morality characters: Lady Macbeth refers to a 'painted devil' (IUi.55), and Macbeth likens himself to a personified 'withered Murder' (ILi.52). The 'devil-porter' of Hell was a familiar, often comic, character in these plays; the Porter is in effect improvising a scene from a morality in which 'hell-mouth' would have been represented physically on the stage. His satirical comedy links *Macbeth* to this tradition of explicitly moral drama.

There are several scenes which serve to provide a more general moral context for the central action of the play, such as those between Ross and the Old Man and between Lennox and a Lord, in which the characters, performing a similar function to that of the chorus in Greek tragedy (The chorus in Classical Greek drama was a group of actors who described and commented upon the main action of a play with song, dance, and recitation), stand back from the action and make clear its universal implications – showing how

the heavens, as troubled with man's act,  
Threaten his bloody stage (II.iv.5-6)

