**William Shakepeare and “Macbeth”**



Arguably the most influential writer in all of English literature, William Shakespeare was born in 1564 to a successful middle class glove-maker in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. Shakespeare attended elementary school, but his formal education ended there. In 1582, at the age of 18, he married an older woman, Anne Hathaway, and had three children with her. Around 1590, he left his family behind and traveled to London to work as an actor and playwright. Public fame quickly followed, and Shakespeare eventually became the most popular playwright in England and, eventually, part-owner of the Globe Theater.

Shakepeare’s career spanned the regimes of both Queen Elizabeth I (ruled 1558–1603) and James I (ruled 1603–1625), and he was a favorite of both monarchs. Indeed, King James granted Shakespeare’s company the greatest possible compliment by giving its members the title of “King’s Men.” Wealthy and famous, Shakespeare retired to Stratford and died in 1616 at the age of fifty-two. At the time of Shakespeare’s death, literary luminaries such as Ben Jonson deemed his works as brilliant and timeless.

Shakespeare’s works were collected and printed in various editions in the century following his death, and by the early eighteenth century his reputation as the greatest poet ever to write in English was well established. The unprecedented admiration acquired by his works led to a widespread curiosity about Shakespeare’s life, but the lack of biographical information has left many details of Shakespeare’s personal history unknown and cloaked in mystery.

Some people have even concluded from this fact and from Shakespeare’s low levels of education that his alleged plays were actually written by someone else—Francis Bacon and the Earl of Oxford are the two most popular candidates—but the support for this claim is overwhelmingly circumstantial, and the theory is not taken seriously by several scholars.

In the absence of believable evidence to the contrary, Shakespeare is commonly viewed as the author of the thirty-seven plays and 154 sonnets that bear his name.

The legacy of this body of work is enormous. A number of Shakespeare’s plays seem to have transcended even the category of brilliance, becoming so influential as to affect profoundly the course of Western literature and culture afterwards. He is also credited with coining several new words, which have since been added to standard English lexicon, as well as certain grammatical structures and phrases.

Shakespeare’s shortest and bloodiest tragedy, *Macbeth* tells the story of a brave Scottish general (Macbeth) who receives a prophecy from a trio of sinister witches that one day he will become King of Scotland. Consumed with ambitious thoughts and encouraged by his wife, Macbeth murders King Duncan and seizes the throne for himself. He begins his regime racked with guilt and fear and soon becomes a tyrannical ruler, as he is forced to commit more and more murders to protect himself from hostility, vengeance, and suspicion from others. The bloodbath swiftly propels Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to arrogance, madness, and death.

*Macbeth* was most likely written in 1606, early in the reign of James I, who had been James VI of Scotland before he succeeded to the English throne in 1603. James was a patron of Shakespeare’s acting company, and of all the plays Shakespeare wrote under James’s reign, *Macbeth* most clearly reflects the playwright’s close relationship with the sovereign. In focusing on Macbeth, a figure from Scottish history, Shakespeare paid homage to his king’s Scottish lineage. Additionally, the witches’ prophecy that Banquo will found a line of kings is a clear signal to James’s family’s claim to have descended from the historical Banquo. In a larger sense, the theme of bad versus good kingship, embodied by Macbeth and Duncan, respectively, would have resonated at the royal court, where James was busy developing his English version of the theory of divine right. Indeed, Shakespeare’s name may not be known today if it weren’t for his political and popular patronage and success in his lifetime.

*Macbeth* is not Shakespeare’s most complex play, but it is certainly one of his most powerful and emotionally intense. Whereas Shakespeare’s other major tragedies, such as *Hamlet* and *Othello,* explore the intellectual predicaments faced by their subjects and the fine nuances of their subjects’ characters, *Macbeth*tumbles madly and passionately from its opening to its conclusion. It is a sharp, jagged sketch of theme and character; as such, it has shocked and fascinated audiences for nearly four hundred years.