

## ***Macbeth* Refresher (675 words)**

Hi there. My name is Mary Hartman, and I'm Director of Education at Bard on the Beach Shakespeare Festival. We perform each year from June to September under tents in an extraordinary place called Señákw, part of the lands of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples. This brief recording provides a bit of background on Shakespeare's play, *Macbeth*.

In 1603, about halfway through William Shakespeare's career, a momentous thing happened: Queen Elizabeth the First died. She had ruled England for 45 years – as long as most people could remember. Elizabeth had never married and had no children, so her successor was James, her double cousin twice removed, who was already King of Scotland. He became James the First of England, and a lot changed for the people of that country, including for Shakespeare.

When Elizabeth was on the throne Shakespeare's company was known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men, named for their patron, who was an important person in Elizabeth's court. When James took the throne, Shakespeare's company became the King's Men, and their patron was the monarch himself.

This brought enhanced status and prestige for Shakespeare and his colleagues, but also a desire to please the new King. James was from Scotland, cared deeply about his genealogy, and was so interested in fighting witchcraft that he wrote a treatise on the subject. Also, his reign in Scotland, which started when he was a baby, was full of violent intrigue: there were several assassinations of powerful people around him and even threats to his own safety. So Shakespeare had a lot to work with when he wrote *Macbeth*.

The play is set in Scotland and begins in a desolate place near a battlefield. Three unusual characters (sometimes described as witches) prepare to meet with Macbeth and Banquo. These 'Weird Sisters' greet Macbeth as Thane of Glamis (Macbeth's current title), then by a new title, Thane of Cawdor. Finally, they declare that Macbeth shall 'be king hereafter'. Before they vanish, the witches predict that Banquo's descendants will be monarchs. Oh, and here's a fun fact: King James believed that he was descended from Banquo. After the witches vanish, the Thane of Ross arrives with news: the Scottish monarch, Duncan has named Macbeth Thane of Cawdor. Of course, Macbeth and Banquo are amazed, and the wheels start turning in Macbeth's mind.

When Banquo and Macbeth join Duncan and the rest of the court in the battlefield camp, Duncan greets them with affection and gratitude. Duncan then announces who will be the successor to the throne: it will be Malcolm, Duncan's eldest child. Duncan then declares that everyone will go to Macbeth's castle at Inverness to celebrate. Macbeth leaves to share the news with Lady Macbeth so they can get everything ready before their guests arrive.

At Macbeth's castle, Lady Macbeth reads a letter from her spouse, in which Macbeth describes the witches' prophecies. Alone, Lady Macbeth invites spirits to remove any natural impulses of

conscience or remorse. When Macbeth arrives with news that Duncan is coming, Lady Macbeth declares that the king will not live to see the following day.

That night as the guests enjoy the celebration, Macbeth contemplates murdering Duncan, but concludes, "I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent". Lady Macbeth enters and provides a spur, telling Macbeth to 'screw your courage to the sticking place' so that their plan will succeed. Lady Macbeth will get Duncan's guards so drunk that they fall into a deep sleep, allowing Macbeth to murder the sleeping Duncan in the middle of the night. Macbeth agrees to proceed with the plan.

As the plot unfolds, the Macbeths unravel, and Shakespeare's play provides us with opportunities to ponder the nature of ambition and the cost of abandoning your principles. Since its first performance in the early 1600s, *Macbeth* has been reimagined, reinterpreted, and adapted by an incredible variety of artists. As we continue to find new ways of looking at the play, we discover new resonances and new ways of grappling with its essential questions.