

Macbeth and the Gothic

Although the generic term 'Gothic' was not in general use until the eighteenth century, the thematic elements which found so much popularity with writers of Gothic novels can be clearly seen in many Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Ghostly presences became a standard of the Elizabethan revenge tragedy, from the spectral arrival of Don Andrea at the opening of Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, to the much discussed appearance of Hamlet's father's ghost on the battlements at Elsinore. *Macbeth*, too, numbers Banquo's ghost in its cast list: he enters shortly after his murder at Macbeth's banquet, striking horror into the heart of the host, and confusion among the guests. Unseen by any character other than Macbeth, this incident is part of a sequence of horrifying visions visited upon the protagonist: the hallucination of a phantom dagger; his sighting of the Witches, who are able to vanish into thin air; the series of terrible Apparitions which speak to him in act four, Scene one.

Set in a period of history in which Scotland was governed by a medieval feudal system and tribal conflicts were not uncommon (the play begins with civil turmoil), *Macbeth* offers a range of Gothic-style locations. With castles at Forres, Inverness, Fife and Dunsinane, Shakespeare's play offers a setting typical of later Gothic romance. These ancient castle-settings are accompanied by a range of sinister effects, including Macduff's loud and persistent knocking at the castle gates in Inverness and the screech of the owl, '**the fatal bellman**' who signifies the night-time and ushers in death (2.2.3). Frequent references to nightmares enhance the tone of the play. This atmosphere is essential to the success of *Macbeth's* sinister projection and also serves as a basis for creating the disconcerting ambience of the Gothic novel, in which terror plays such an important role.

The contribution of Renaissance theatrical trends to Gothic literature extends further than this - the array of supernatural and other-worldly elements in Shakespearean theatre are startling, and nowhere more so than in *Macbeth*. Not only witches and ghosts haunt the stage, but strange and hideous happenings occur. The superstitious element in *Macbeth* perhaps reaches its apex on the night of Duncan's murder, when unwelcome phenomena and omens take place. In Act two, Scene four, Ross exchanges news with an Old Man, describing ('a thing most strange and certain') how he had witnessed Duncan's horses eating one another (2.4.14). The strange and the grotesque are integral elements of the Gothic imagination. Abnormal events, such as the grisly incident described by Ross, are often interpreted as omens, forerunners of even stranger things to come. Similarly, the use of *pathetic fallacy helps to create an atmosphere of foreboding, a technique also put to powerful use in the cinema. (How many screen versions of *Dracula* or *Frankenstein* have you seen in which thunderstorms

and bolts of lightning illuminate the castle or laboratory and intensify the story?) *Macbeth* calls for stormy effects whenever the Weird Sisters appear on the stage.

Shakespeare's characterisations in *Macbeth* also add to its influence upon Gothic literature: the protagonist is a strong, cruel character who reflects later portrayals of tyrannical heroes who rule by force and fear - such as Emily Bronte's Heathcliff, for instance. Macbeth's relationship with his wife, although often tender, continually juxtaposes endearments with nightmarish imagery: 'O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife' (3.2.36). Theirs is a profoundly dark sort of love. Moreover, while Macbeth schemes and Lady Macbeth becomes further possessed by imaginary horrors, Macduff - the chief antagonist - moves mysteriously in the background. The audience remains for a long time unclear as to where Macduff's allegiance lies, what he is doing in England and why he has left his family to be slaughtered by Macbeth's men. Macduff's importance to the tragedy is not immediately clear, but it gradually emerges that he will be the man to kill the tyrant at the play's climax. The portrayal of the Witches too, has become a standard representation of the occult in later literature: their androgyny ('you should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so' [1.3.45-47]), their ability to vanish in mid-air, their fondness for speaking in rhymed sing-song voices, all influence the representation of Witches in both Gothic and wider literature. The blood covered ghost who comes to haunt his murderer is a cliché of the later Gothic, which abounds in spectral visitations. This is a device which works similarly to Lady Macbeth's indissoluble blood spot: the burden of guilt and conscience manifests itself in physical appearance, blurring the boundary between the spiritual and physical worlds.

The atmosphere of the Gothic is not uninterrupted in *Macbeth*. Many commentators feel that the Witches' song and dance interludes - probably added by Thomas Middleton, rather than by Shakespeare - disrupt the tone of the play and diminish the impact of its otherwise consistent representation of evil. The appearance of Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft - in Act three, Scene five - also appears to be a break from the dominant tone of the tragedy. Sometimes, perhaps due to the feeling that these scenes do 'break the spell' of the wider play, they are excluded from dramatic performance.